

Risk-Informed Oversight and Clearer Expectations for Assurance Systems Would Improve Accountability

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A report to congressional committees

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What GAO Found

Selected field offices in Department of Energy's (DOE) Office of Environmental Management (EM) have taken steps to evaluate effectiveness of contractor assurance systems (CAS) in accordance with DOE policy, though neither DOE nor EM have defined effectiveness or specified evaluation criteria. The basis on which the selected field offices made their respective effectiveness determinations was unclear (see table). In addition, all selected field offices reported examples of poor CAS performance and recurring issues that undermined the reliability of the effectiveness determinations.

How Selected EM Field Offices Assessed Contractor Assurance System (CAS) Effectiveness

Selected field office	CAS effectiveness determination	Was CAS effectiveness defined?	Were effectiveness criteria included?
Hanford	Effective	No	No
Idaho	Effective	No	No
Los Alamos	Not determined	No	No

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Environmental Management (EM) information. | GAO-26-107850

- Hanford:** The field office reported that the contractor demonstrated poor work planning and conduct of operations, requiring EM to formally request a corrective action plan in several areas. Also, the contractor's review of issues between January 2022 and October 2023 found that it improperly closed and insufficiently documented nearly 40 percent of sampled issues at the two highest significance levels. These are issues that should not recur or are typically related to misuse of resources, according to field office officials.
- Idaho:** The field office reported that the number and severity of conduct of operations and maintenance-related abnormal events indicated a need for improved rigor and discipline in operations. The contractor noted trends that showed a continuing need for attention to detail and personnel awareness. Additionally, the contractor reported 15 radiological events over 8 months that put personnel at risk of radiological overexposure.
- Los Alamos:** The field office identified concerns with CAS effectiveness, including that the contractor did not have effective processes for self-identifying significant issues. Furthermore, a widespread breakdown of the contractor's training and qualification program in 2023 resulted in a stop work order—an indicator that a CAS is not functioning well, according to a field office official. The stop work order resulted in a 90-day delay for nuclear waste disposal and environmental remediation efforts.

Without defining what constitutes an effective CAS—including establishing specific, measurable evaluation criteria—field offices do not have concrete guidelines for evaluating CASs and their determinations may be less informative or meaningful as a result. Additionally, the lack of a clear definition hinders EM's ability to hold the contractor accountable, and EM cannot be assured that contractors can effectively and efficiently manage risks.

Why GAO Did This Study

EM relies on contractors to execute its mission to clean up contaminated sites from decades of nuclear-related activities. EM expects certain contractors to design and use a CAS—management systems and processes to oversee their own performance, identify and report potential problems, and take actions to prevent their recurrence. According to EM policy, EM is to rely on outcomes and information from CASs to inform and optimize their respective oversight programs. However, in 2024, an independent entity found that contractors inadequately managed issues, leading to compromised safety and increased likelihood of significant consequences.

Senate Report 118-58, accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024, includes a provision for GAO to examine EM's oversight of contractors' assurance systems. This report examines the extent to which EM has evaluated the effectiveness of selected CASs.

GAO reviewed EM and contractor documents, conducted a site visit, and interviewed DOE officials and contractors. GAO selected three contracts and associated CASs, contractors, and field offices to review based on factors including contract value and purpose.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to EM, including that it define CAS effectiveness and establish specific, measurable evaluation criteria. DOE concurred with the recommendations.