



The \$200 Billion Question: Does Anyone Care about Cleaning Up the Nation's Nuclear Weapons Sites?

by Katherine Probst and Adam Lowe

The United States stopped building nuclear weapons in the late 1980s, but the contamination from five decades of weapons production poses a threat that will last for decades to come. Changes are needed now to make sure that the \$200 billion cleanup of our former nuclear weapons facilities will be successful.

Cleaning up the nation's former nuclear weapons sites is the largest environmental undertaking the United States has ever faced. Fifty billion dollars has already been spent on this effort. The Department of Energy (DOE), which leads the cleanup through its Office of Environmental Management (EM), estimates that addressing the contamination resulting from five decades of nuclear weapons production will cost the nation at least another \$150 to \$200 billion—and will take seventy more years to complete.

And, even after all this money is spent, long-term stewardship will be required at most of the 100 sites affected, to assure that people do not come into contact with the hazards that will remain.

Given the threat posed by this Cold War legacy—and the huge sums of money and time required to

address it—one might expect that cleanup of the weapons sites would be near the top of the nation's environmental agenda. So why don't presidential candidates debate it on the stump? Why doesn't Congress probe this issue in the same detail as Superfund, which costs taxpayers far less? The fact is that except in those communities close to contaminated sites, cleanup of the nation's nuclear weapons sites registers barely a blip on the nation's environmental radar.

A new paper we released in late January, *Cleaning Up the Nuclear Weapons Complex: Does Anybody Care?*, concludes that it is time for senior leaders in the executive branch and Congress to fully scrutinize the costs and effectiveness of DOE's Environmental Management program. Given that most of the task of

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cleaning up these sites still lies before us, embarking on meaningful change today could bring benefits for many decades to come.

Although there have been sporadic attempts by Congress and others to hold DOE's feet to the fire, there has been little sustained effort to address fundamental questions, such as whether the EM program is focused on appropriate goals, whether it is effective in meeting them, or whether the \$50 billion expended on the EM program since 1989 has been wisely spent. In fact, the program has largely escaped the kind of sustained scrutiny paid to other environmental issues by advocates, the media, Congress, or administrations of both parties.

There are many reasons for this lack of attention. First, it is difficult to focus on an environmental problem that is so large in scope and so technically complex that it almost defies comprehension. Adding to

the inattention is the fact that most of the former nuclear weapons production facilities are in remote areas, far from major population centers. Funding and much of the oversight of DOE's environmental program fall under the defense committees in Congress, where even huge environmental outlays pale in comparison with other defense programs. And DOE's environmental management program has become an important job-creation engine in the communities that once employed many in the nuclear weapons enterprise, making it a politically popular program, and reducing the incentives to ask tough questions.

Increased scrutiny is long overdue, however.

The 100-plus sites in EM's portfolio harbor contamination that will remain hazardous for thousands of years, and billions of dollars will be spent to reduce these risks in the coming decades. Already, mismanaged or misguided projects have cost taxpayers millions of dollars in the past ten years, as documented by many investigations by the General Accounting Office and others. Unless the environmental management program is held accountable, we as a nation may never know what we are buying for \$6 billion per year—a budget nearly as high as that of the entire U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Action should come at several levels. First, the DOE must clarify the mission of the EM and separate DOE's "job creation" and economic transition functions from EM's environmental management activities. Since the winding down of the Cold War, EM's mission has evolved not only to include environmental

restoration and waste management, but also, indirectly, to create jobs and ease economic transition at former nuclear weapons production sites. All of EM's current individual missions should be evaluated, and core missions clearly stated. Changes are also needed in internal accounting and budgeting processes to clarify how money is spent and to improve the accountability of the program's federal employees as well as its 36,000 prime contractor employees.

One of the most important actions Congress and the Administration should take is to begin to decide which EM sites will, and which will not, have a future DOE mission. The United States stopped producing nuclear weapons ten years ago, yet we have not decided which former weapons sites and facilities will have a future use and remain in operation. This uncertainty hampers cleanup efforts. Congress should enact legislation, modeled on the Base Closure Realignment Act, that defines a process for deciding which sites will have future missions, and which will be closed, a step that ultimately could speed cleanup and help crystallize appropriate environmental goals at each site.

While there are myriad reporting requirements on the books, Congress should require the development of useful annual reports on the EM program. Even though \$50 billion has been spent on environmental management activities since 1989, it is still difficult to determine the extent of contamination at some of the major sites, and to understand the possible alternatives for addressing them. At some sites, it is also difficult to understand what progress has been made. Congress should require DOE to provide annual reports that detail progress made to date, identify how resources at each site were spent, and estimate future costs of cleanup and stewardship. Congress will need to ensure that this reporting is taken seriously. These reports are important, because they can provide a foundation for effective congressional oversight.

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Finally, Congress or the president should create an independent commission to evaluate the current EM organizational structure and identify needed reforms. This commission should focus on establishing a clear mission, streamlining lines of authority, encouraging greater internal and external accountability, and protecting the environmental management program from parochial interests. One key question it should address is whether the environmental management of former nuclear weapons sites truly belongs in the Department of Energy.

What will it take to accomplish these goals? Something that cannot be legislated: leadership. The steps we recommend above are critical to increasing the program's credibility and ensuring cost-effective achievement of critical environmental goals. For this to happen, Congress and senior officials in the executive branch need to be committed to true reform of the nation's largest environmental program, and to making what are sure to be difficult decisions to achieve that reform.

To help those interested in finding out more about DOE's environmental management program and some of the important policy debates regarding the nuclear weapons complex, RFF has created a new web site—<http://www.rff.org/nuclearcleanup>—that pulls together approximately 100 links to 50 organizations that have done analysis of issues related to the cleanup. There are links to official government reports, and independent analyses from environmental groups and other nonprofits. Our hope is that this site will make it easier for those interested in the cleanup of the weapons complex to find the information they need. Look for more information on the site on page 5 of this issue of *Resources*.

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