

- Home
- Pay & Benefits
- Management
- Homeland Security
- Defense
- E-Government
- Per Diems & Travel
- Jobs & Careers
- Procurement
- A-76 & Outsourcing
- Bill Tracker
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Daily Briefing

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GAO: Energy needs to improve recovery of radioactive sources

By Mike Nartker, [Global Security Newswire](#)

The Energy Department needs to place a higher priority on the recovery of unwanted sealed radioactive sources to prevent terrorists from using them in radiological weapons, according to a new report from the General Accounting Office.

In its report ([03-483](#)), the GAO examined Energy's efforts to recover and securely store unwanted radioactive sources containing "greater-than-Class-C material"—low-level radioactive wastes containing isotopes such as americium 241, cesium 137, plutonium 238 and strontium 239. These sources, considered by the GAO to be "particularly attractive for potential use in producing 'dirty bombs,'" cannot be disposed of at existing commercial disposal facilities, according to the report.

The Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory has estimated that there could be as many as 500,000 greater-than-class-C sources in the United States, but the exact number of how many of these sources are unwanted is unknown because such records were never kept, according to the report. Officials in the Energy Department's Off-Site Recovery Project have estimated that they will recover about 14,300 unwanted greater-than-class-C sources by fiscal 2010 at a cost of approximately \$69 million, the report says. As of 2010, such sources would be sent directly to a planned disposal facility and the recovery project would end, according to department estimates.

As of February, the Off-Site Recovery Project has recovered more than 5,000 greater-than-class-C sources from about 160 U.S. sites, the GAO report says. It warns, however, that the project's future recovery efforts could be jeopardized by three problems: an apparent lack of commitment to the project by Energy's Office of Environmental Management, inadequate high-security storage capabilities and an inability to store sources containing strontium 90 and cesium 137.

According to the report, officials from the Office of Environmental Management, which currently oversees the recovery project, have said they want responsibility for the project transferred to another departmental office because the project is inconsistent with their mission. They also said that the recovery project did not receive full

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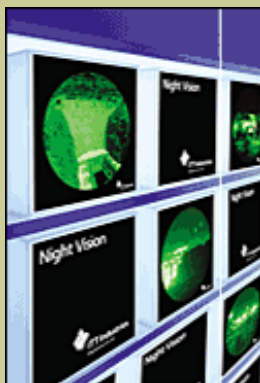


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funding because of other higher priority projects and that anticipated future funding levels would hinder the recovery project's effectiveness, the report says. It also says that if the project is not adequately funded to recover additional sources, the sources' owners will have to secure their sources until a disposal site is available.

The GAO also found that the recovery project cannot store any further greater-than-class-C sources containing plutonium 239, which has the potential for use in a crude nuclear weapon, because there is no longer space at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico that meets departmental security standards. As a result, the report says, about 150 owners of sources containing plutonium 239, mainly universities, must work to securely store them until more disposal space becomes available. Besides a lack of storage for greater-than-class-C sources containing plutonium 239, the Energy Department has also not approved a temporary disposal site for sources containing strontium 90 and cesium 137 at a department facility until the planned permanent disposal facility is established, the report says.

Energy officials have acknowledged the problems facing the recovery project and are working to resolve them, according to the report. It recommends that the department determine if the recovery project has been given an appropriate priority level and adequate funding. The report also encourages the department to work quickly to establish secure storage space for greater-than-class-C sources containing plutonium 239, strontium 90 and cesium 137.

In addition, the GAO also criticized the Energy Department for its lack of progress in establishing a permanent disposal facility for greater-than-class-C sources. More than 17 years after the enactment of legislation requiring that the department provide such a facility, Energy has made little progress in doing so, the report says, noting that the department had anticipated completing such a facility by 2007.

According to the report, the department has not even begun the first step in establishing a permanent disposal site—the completion of appropriate environmental analyses. Officials at the department's Office of Environmental Management have said that funding for such an analysis was allocated in fiscal 2002 and 2003, but a budget review last year led to those funds being reallocated to other priorities, the report says.

It also says the department is considering transferring the responsibility for the analysis to another Energy office and that a decision on the transfer is expected to be made by the end of fiscal 2003. Once an environmental impact statement is completed, the department could then propose to build a new permanent disposal facility—which could take up to seven years to develop—or to use an existing facility, according to the report.

The report recommends that the department begin the process to establish a permanent disposal facility and to develop a plan for the continued recovery of greater-than-class-C sources in the "likely event" that the establishment of a permanent disposal facility is

delayed beyond 2007.

New Legislation

Sen. Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, who commissioned the GAO report, Tuesday introduced new legislation to require the Energy Department to provide a final disposal facility for greater-than-class-C sources.

“GAO recently finished their inquiry, and I am sorry to report that GAO found our house is not in order,” Akaka said Tuesday on the Senate floor in introducing his bill, the Low-Level Radioactive Waste Act of 2003.

Under Akaka’s bill, the Energy secretary would be required to assign a departmental office the responsibility of establishing a final disposal facility for greater-than-class-C sources. The bill also requires the energy secretary to submit several reports to Congress on the progress of creating such a facility.

For example, the bill sets a one-year deadline for Energy to submit a report on the amount of greater-than-class-C sources needing disposal of and of the actions being taken to secure such sources. The department would then have 180 days after that report to submit to Congress a cost estimate and schedule to complete an EIS for a permanent disposal facility. Akaka’s bill would also require the Energy secretary to submit a report to Congress by the end of the year on the continued recovery and storage of greater-than-class-C sources until a permanent disposal facility is established.

“We have been particularly worried about the radioactive sources being stolen from the former Soviet Union, meanwhile an accurate tally of the radioactive devices in use in this country does not exist,” said Akaka, whose home state contains four greater-than-class-C sources that need to be recovered, according to the GAO report. “A central issue is what happens to unwanted radioactive devices. We don’t have an exact count of unwanted devices in this country. Thousands of unwanted sources are awaiting recovery. Thousands more will need to be recovered,” he said in a statement.

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