

Nuclear waste sites need long-term planning

By Keith Mulvihill

NEW YORK, Aug 11 (Reuters Health) - The legacy of the Cold War will live on and on--for roughly tens of thousands of years--in the form of radioactive waste from the manufacturing of nuclear bombs.

Now, the Department of Energy (DOE) is planning a transition from active waste site management to "long-term stewardship" of the 144 waste sites in the United States. Many are severely contaminated with highly dangerous radioactive materials like plutonium.

In a report released this week by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), National Research Council, scientists from around the country weighed in on the long-term plan of how the government should cope with this monumental task. The expert panel views the current plan as "problematic."

For example, the report highlighted the fact that there is currently no long-term plan for the safe keeping of the public and the environment from the hazardous threats presented by these sites.

"Details of the US Department of Energy's stewardship plans have yet to be specified, adequate funding has not been assured, and there is no convincing evidence that institutional controls--such as surveillance of radioactive and other hazardous waste left at sites, security fences, and deeds restricting land use--will prove reliable over the long run," the National Research Council said in a statement that announced the report's release.

"These 144 sites were often used to manufacture weapons, or acted as test sites and in some instances they were processing sites where uranium was mined," said Robert Andrews of the National Research Council in Washington, DC.

"There is a broad spectrum of sizes of sites and the amount of hazardous contaminants that are found at these places," he added.

In addition to helping the DOE devise a framework for planning the long-term institutional management of these weapons sites, the report stresses the importance of keeping abreast of new technologies and methodologies that are invented to better deal with these hazardous substances. They recommend continuing remediation, or cleanup, of these sites.

"The NAS report breaks no new ground scientifically but serves the important purpose of starkly underscoring the long-term environmental and health threats posed by DOE weapons sites," said Tom Clements, the executive director of the Nuclear Control Institute, an independent research and advocacy center specializing in problems of nuclear proliferation.

"While the report makes clear that DOE environmental efforts so far have been lacking in long-term vision and institutional support, the big question of how to address this problem must be solved by DOE itself," he said.

"The report destroys the myth that 'cleaning up' the DOE sites is possible and that we will one day be able to walk away from the nuclear legacy of the Cold War. Unfortunately, that tarnished and dangerous legacy will forever remain with humankind," Clements added.

The report "should be seriously studied by those in Congress who have called for the elimination of the Department of Energy. The report clearly demonstrates that a strong and enduring institution, isolated from political bickering, must be put in place to oversee management of sites contaminated with dangerous chemical and radioactive substances," Clements told Reuters Health in an interview.

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