Long-Lived Legacy: Managing High-Level and Transuranic Waste at the DOE Nuclear Weapons Complex

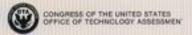
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LONG-LIVED LEGACY

Managing High-Level and Transuranic Waste at the DOE Nuclear Weapons Complex

BACKGROUND PAPER



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Foreword

This background paper is a technical annex to the main OTA report *Complex Cleanup: The Environmental Legacy of Nuclear Weapons Production.* It describes, documents, and analyzes available data about two key waste management problems at the Department of Energy Weapons Complex—those of high-level radioactive waste and transuranic waste. The paper is organized in two chapters—"Chapter 1: Managing High Level Waste' and 'Chapter 2: Managing Transuranic Waste." Each chapter contains a summary overview followed by a discussion and analysis of important areas in the waste management problem that the DOE faces at present and in its future operations.

DOE has made significant investments in waste management throughout the Weapons Complex in the past, and those investments are likely to grow in the future. The 1990 Five-Year Plan calls for almost \$20 billion in waste management expenditures (about two-thirds of the total in the plan) over the next **5 years.** Major new facilities are nearing completion and plans for additional facilities have been put forward. The challenge for DOE is to develop more effective practices for managing both current and future waste in order to avoid repeating the serious problems of the past.

In this assessment, OTA has focused on high-level and transuranic waste because these forms often pose the most risk, they are essentially unique to DOE, and the bulk of DOE's waste management resources will be devoted to them. Large quantities of other wastes are also generated throughout the Weapons Complex (i.e., low-level radioactive waste and hazardous waste), and a comprehensive approach to all waste management must be followed by DOE. This background paper, therefore, reviews only some of the critical areas and aspects of the DOE waste problem in order to provide data and further analysis of important issues covered in the main OTA report.

As noted above, this paper is part of a broader assessment of environmental restoration and waste management at the DOE Nuclear Weapons Complex and was used to provide background material for input to the larger assessment. Information for the study was obtained from DOE and DOE contractor personnel, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Academy of Sciences, citizens groups, academics, other independent organizations, and a variety of media. Visits to obtain information and observe practices firsthand were made to the Savannah River Site, the Hanford Reservation, West Valley, NY, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, Los Alamos National Laboratory, Sandia National Laboratory, the Environmental Evaluation Group, and the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory. We are grateful to all who provided information and to the reviewers who raised many valuable questions about earlier drafts.

Detailed analysis and in-depth information about the entire DOE waste management program is available largely from DOE itself. The subject is extensive and complex with along history, some of which is undocumented in the public literature. The data that are available are often in a form that is difficult to access, assemble, summarize, and interpret. While it may be useful for some agency to investigate this subject more thoroughly, OTA concluded that the analysis contained herein would be most useful for congressional policymakers at this time.

JOHN H. GIBBONS

Director

Advisory Panel—Managing High-Level and Transuranic Waste at the DOE Nuclear Weapons Complex

Roger H. Davidson, *Chairman* Professor, University of Maryland

Jackie L. Braitman

Vice President and Manager

Environmental Management and Information

Systems Division Roy F. Weston, Inc.

William A. Brewer

Consulting Geologist and Engineer

Norman Cohen Professor & Director

Laboratory for Radiological Studies New York University Medical Center

Gary A. Davis Senior Fellow

Waste Management Institute University of Tennessee

Patrick D. Eagan, P.E. Program Director

Department of Engineering Professional

Development

University of Wisconsin

George M. Hornberger

Professor, Department of Environmental Sciences

University of Virginia

Joseph Hughart

Senior Assistant Sanitaria U.S. Public Health Service

George R. Jasny Retired Vice President

Martin Marietta Energy Systems, Inc.

Bernd Kahn

Director, Environmental Resources Center

Georgia Institute of Technology

Ellen J. Mangione

Director, Disease Control and Environmental

Epidemiology

Colorado Department of Health

Robert H. Neill

Director

Environmental Evaluation Group

State of New Mexico

Glenn Paulson

Research Professor, Pritzker

Department of Environmental Engineering

Illinois Institute of Technology

Dan W. Reicher

Senior Attorney

Natural Resources Defense Council

Jacqueline W. Sales

President

Hazardous and Medical Waste Services, Inc.

R. Lewis Shaw

Deputy Commissioner

South Carolina Department of Health and

Environmental Control

Office of Environmental Quality Control

NOTE: OTA appreciates and is grateful for the valuable assistance and thoughtful critiques provided by the advisory panel members. The panel does not, however, necessarily approve, disapprove, or endorse this background paper. OTA assumes full responsibility for the background paper and the accuracy of its contents.

OTA Project Staff-Managing High-Level and Transuranic Waste at the DOE Nuclear Weapons Complex

John Andelin, Assistant Director, OTA Science, Information, and Natural Resources Division

Robert W. Niblock, Oceans and Environment Program Manager

Peter A. Johnson, Project Director

Emilia L. Govan, Senior Analyst
Joan Ham, Senior Analyst
Judy Kowalski, Analyst
Robert P. Morgan, Visiting Senior Analyst
Tara O'Toole, Senior Analyst
German Reyes, Analyst
Laura L. Taylor, Intern
My K. Ton, Intern

Administrative Staff
Kathleen Beil
Sally Van Aller

Contributors

Florence Poillon, Editor

¹On sabbatical at OTA from Washington University, St. Louis, MO.

Reviewers—Managing High-Level and Transuranic Waste at the DOE Nuclear Weapons Complex

The following persons assisted OTA in reviewing one or more drafts of this background paper for accuracy, completeness, emphasis, and presentation. Their comments and suggestions were used to modify and correct earlier drafts. This help was extremely valuable and contributed substantially to the quality of the final report.

Carl Bannerman

U.S. General Accounting Office
Allen G. Croff
Oak Ridge National Laboratory
Bernd Kahn
Georgia Institute of Technology

Arjun Makhijani Institute for Energy and Environmental Research Robert H. Neill New Mexico Environmental Evaluation Group

Alfred Schneider Georgia Institute of Technology
David W. Turner Oak Ridge National Laboratory

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