DOE Accelerated Cleanup Program of the Nuclear Weapons Complex an Invitation to Lax Standard

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The Department of Energy Accelerated Cleanup Program of the Nuclear Weapons Complex an Invitation to Lax Standards

Bush Administration DOE Budget May Increase Contamination Threat to Crucial Water Resources

DOE Should Be Relieved of Cleanup Responsibility; States Should Be Given the Option and Funds for Cleanup

Takoma Park, Maryland., Feb. 4, 2002: In its budget document for fiscal year 2003, the Bush administration has deemed the six-billion dollar-a-year Environmental Management (EM) Program of the Department of Energy (DOE) as "ineffective." The budget proposes an expenditure of $6.7 billion on Environmental Management, including "$800 million in a new 'reserve' fund to implement fundamental program changes, with the expectation that the proposed reforms will improve cleanup efficiency by completing construction projects within baselines, reducing the cost of waste treatment and disposal, and integrating cleanup strategies across different sites." (p. 127)

"I think the Bush administration's conclusion that the DOE's Environmental Management Program is ineffective is completely correct," said Dr. Arjun Makhijani, president of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (IEER), in Takoma Park, Maryland, which has published many studies on nuclear-related technologies. "With some exceptions, what we have had so far is largely a cleanup of taxpayer dollars, rather than a program that will actually protect future generations. But the proposed cure does not address the cause of the disease. On the contrary, it is likely to make the program worse."

For instance, the Department of Energy has recently suggested, as part of cost cutting at its Hanford, Washington site, that it may be preferable to mix most of the highly radioactive waste with cement and discharge it into lined trenches on the site. The Columbia River, the largest in the West, runs through the site.

"This approach to cost cutting would turn the Hanford site into a de facto high-level waste dump," said Dr. Makhijani. "It would represent an abandonment of a program of glassifying this dangerous waste and disposing of it in a deep repository. It's not the program idea of glassification of the waste that's wrong. The problem has mostly been bad management and contracting, and poor execution."

IEER published a major study on the EM program in 1997, which documented the many failures of the program and recommended changes. Institutional problems were central, including failure to use the best available technology and science, failure to prepare projects with small-scale trials, and lack of proper

project review. The report recommended that the EM program been taken out of DOE. Another basic problem it pointed out was the lack of stringent clean-up standards.

“You can’t have a sound program without stringent, national cleanup standards which the DOE has refused to have. This rush to cleanup is not a substitute for a sound program that is directed towards protecting water resources and future generations,” said Dr. Makhijani. ” The proposed acceleration of cleanup is really a continuation of the old pattern that has been a part of the problem. There have been several ‘accelerated’ cleanup proposals already and they stress expedient short-term approaches, like capping dumps or cementing wastes, which often create worse long-term problems. And the DOE should be relieved of its cleanup responsibilities. States that want to do it should be given an escrow account with enough funds to do the cleanup themselves with their own contractors, under stringent federal oversight.”

IEER has put a major focus on pointing out the necessity of a sound cleanup program to protect some of the most important water resources in the United States. In October 2001, IEER published a study, Poison in the Vadose Zone, about the Snake River Plain aquifer. It pointed out that the DOE did not have plans to retrieve the enormous amount of plutonium-contaminated waste, containing more than one ton of plutonium, that had been dumped on the site, which sits over the sole source aquifer, which is the largest contiguous aquifer in the West.

“Accelerating clean-up will not address the great difficulties of how the buried waste is to be retrieved at the Idaho National Lab and how it will be processed for safe storage and repository disposal,” said Dr. Makhijani. “The $800 million fund to accelerate cleanup seems like an invitation for states to settle for lax standards that would leave considerable amounts of radioactivity in the soil. This approach promises to pose an even greater threat to crucial water resources like the Snake River Plan aquifer, the Savannah River, and the Columbia River. Offering money for accelerated cleanup without stringent cleanup standards and buried waste retrieval is the wrong way to go. The government should put more money into protecting crucial water resources from critical threats.”

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