GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-23-105968, a report to congressional requesters

September 2023

NUCLEAR WASTE CLEANUP

Army Corps Could Benefit from Following Leading Practices for Program Management for Contaminated Sites

Why GAO Did This Study

Atomic energy activities supported by the federal government generated large amounts of radioactive and hazardous waste over several decades of nuclear weapons production and energy research following World War II. This waste has contaminated soil, groundwater, and structures at sites across the country, posing potential risks to human health and the environment. The Corps is responsible for cleaning up or controlling contamination at some of these sites through FUSRAP.

GAO was asked to provide information about the Corps' efforts to clean up contamination under FUSRAP. This report, among other things, (1) describes the reported environmental liabilities associated with active FUSRAP sites and uncertainties around those estimates and (2) examines the extent to which FUSRAP meets leading practices for program management.

GAO reviewed legal requirements, federal accounting standards, agency documents, and leading program management practices; analyzed data on the Corps' cleanup expenditures and total cost estimates; and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that the Corps conduct risk management and develop a life cycle cost estimate for FUSRAP in accordance with leading program management practices. The Corps agreed with our recommendations.

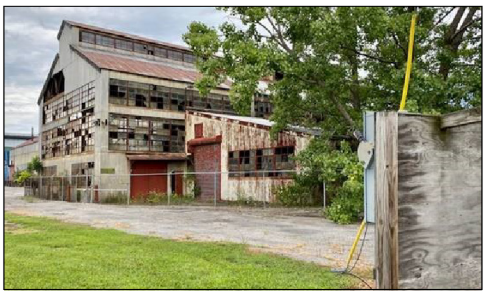
View GAO-23-105968. For more information, contact Nathan Anderson at (202) 512-3841 or AndersonN@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) reported $2.6 billion in environmental liabilities in fiscal year 2022 for the estimated future costs to investigate and clean up contamination under its Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program (FUSRAP). Of the 19 active sites in the program, four sites with complicated cleanup remedies or large amounts of contamination make up about three-quarters of this estimate. However, Corps officials said that FUSRAP's environmental liability has the potential to be affected by uncertainties, such as the discovery of additional contamination after completing a cost estimate for remediation. Since 2016, FUSRAP's environmental liability has risen by nearly $1 billion, an increase that officials attribute to uncertainties, along with inflation.

Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program Sites in St. Louis, Missouri, and Lockport, New York, Being Cleaned up by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Site in St. Louis County, Missouri



Site in Lockport, New York

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105968

GAO's review of FUSRAP documents found that the Corps minimally met selected leading practices for program management related to risk management and cost estimating, among other things. For example:

- **Programs should identify risks and opportunities, document their characteristics, and prepare to manage them.** The Corps does not have a documented program-level risk management process for FUSRAP. A program-level risk management process could help officials identify and manage risks that can affect multiple projects, such as limited staffing in areas like procurement, which officials said can extend some projects' timelines.
- **Programs should have an integrated life cycle cost estimate that is comprehensive.** Corps officials said that they consider FUSRAP's environmental liability estimate to be the program's life cycle cost estimate. However, the environmental liability estimate does not include all costs and does not track costs from previous years. Having an integrated life cycle cost estimate that includes all program costs could enhance FUSRAP management's ability to make risk-informed decisions on how to manage and allocate its resources.

Corps officials said that the agency's standard business practices do not require FUSRAP to adhere to some of the leading practices at the program level. Although not required, following these and other leading practices would better position the Corps to oversee and manage FUSRAP.