

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106014](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Numerous entities have an interest in, or may be affected by, EM's cleanup of nuclear waste generated by weapons production and energy research at 15 sites across the country. EM has recognized the importance of engaging with stakeholders and governments about its cleanup work. However, the secrecy around DOE's war-time operations and a history of contamination at the sites have affected this engagement. According to a 2022 report from the National Academies of Sciences, lingering mistrust of EM's work persists.

GAO was asked to review EM's engagement with stakeholders and governments. This report (1) identifies leading practices for engaging stakeholders and governments in the context of environmental cleanup, (2) examines EM engagement at selected sites, and factors that could help or hinder these sites from implementing leading practices, and (3) assesses the extent to which EM has guidance for engagement.

GAO reviewed reports and obtained expert input on leading practices. GAO analyzed EM policies and documents for conducting engagement and interviewed EM officials, stakeholders, and government officials at four EM sites selected based on cleanup cost and status.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations, including that EM develop a national framework and site-specific engagement plans that align with leading practices for engagement. DOE concurred with all three GAO recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106014](#). For more information, contact Nathan Anderson at (202) 512-3841 or andersonn@gao.gov.

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NUCLEAR WASTE CLEANUP

Adopting Leading Practices Could Strengthen DOE's Engagement with Stakeholders and Governments

What GAO Found

To help federal agencies facilitate meaningful engagement on environmental cleanup issues, GAO identified eight leading practices for how federal agencies should engage with stakeholders and governments (see fig.). The leading practices can apply to engagement with a wide range of stakeholders and governments, including community and national interest groups, members of the public, advisory boards, state and local governments, Tribal Nations, and other federal agencies.

Leading Stakeholder and Government Engagement Practices for Environmental Cleanup

	Demonstrate agency commitment
	Ensure agency resources and capacity
	Clearly define and communicate goals and expectations
	Systematically and iteratively identify and include relevant stakeholders and governments
	Minimize barriers to meaningful participation
	Design engagement to fit the goals and context
	Provide valid scientific information that addresses stakeholders' and governments' concerns
	Follow through on commitments to engagement

Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106014

Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Environmental Management (EM) officials engage with stakeholders and governments through various actions depending on the context and the culture of the site and community. GAO interviewed officials at four EM sites—Hanford, Moab, Portsmouth, and Savannah River—and found that various factors could help or hinder EM's implementation of leading practices for engagement. For example, EM leaders' investment in engagement may make stakeholders and governments feel valued while underscoring the importance of engagement to EM site staff. In contrast, turnover of EM leadership and staff may result in inconsistent engagement over time as well as the loss of long-standing relationships, which may undermine EM's ability to build and sustain trust with stakeholders and governments.

GAO found that EM has no overarching guidance outlining an approach for how its cleanup sites are to engage with stakeholders and governments. Instead, EM Headquarters delegates engagement to each cleanup site. GAO found that site engagement plans vary in scope or may be outdated. GAO also found that the culture of engagement differs from site to site and depends partly on the preferences and personalities of site leadership. Moreover, EM officials told GAO that trust and positive relationships could be lost when leadership turns over.

Independent organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency have noted the importance of having a framework for stakeholder engagement that establishes an agency's values, as well as developing site-specific engagement plans. By developing a national framework that defines EM's strategy for how to engage with stakeholders and governments across the EM complex, along with site-specific engagement plans aligned with leading practices, EM could better position itself to build and maintain trust with stakeholders and governments affected by its decisions.