

Opening Statement  
Chair Diana DeGette  
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
Hearing on “DOE’s Mounting Cleanup Costs: Billions in Environmental Liability and Growing”  
May 1, 2019

Today, we continue the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations’ long-standing efforts to oversee the Department of Energy’s management of its environmental cleanup programs.

Over the course of the Cold War, the United States developed an industrial complex to research, test, and produce nuclear power reactors and weapons.

This effort left behind thousands of tons of radioactive waste, and contaminated soil and water at sites nationwide, and the United States government is financially liable for cleaning it up. It is now estimated that it will cost hundreds of billions of dollars to do so.

The Department of Energy’s Office of Environmental Management—or “EM”—is largely responsible for this difficult task. It does this by managing contractors and complex cleanup operations at sites across the United States.

I know how important this work is because one site, the Rocky Flats Plant in Colorado, is just up the road from my district

The good news is that, over the prior decades, EM has successfully cleaned up Rocky Flats and many other sites.

The bad news is that the remaining 16 sites—which still need major work—are arguably the most challenging and costly to cleanup.

On top of that, the estimated cost to address these remaining sites is large and is quickly growing.

For example, according to DOE’s FY 2018 financial report, EM’s environmental liability grew by a total of \$214 billion since just 2011. And, as of 2018, this figure had climbed to a staggering \$377 billion.

During this same period, EM spent \$48 billion on cleanup efforts, which means environmental liability is growing at a level that is outpacing DOE’s spending and, possibly, its ability to cleanup these sites.

GAO has told the Committee that this growing liability poses not only a financial risk to the taxpayer, but possibly to cleanup operations if corners are cut or important tasks are deferred to future dates due to costs.

Over the past several decades, this Committee, GAO, and others have raised numerous concerns about DOE’s management of these cleanups. Unfortunately, many of those same

concerns and questions continue to this day.

In 2017, and again this year, GAO included the federal government's environmental liabilities to its "High-Risk" list which are those federal programs that are most at risk to fraud, waste, or mismanagement.

But this should come as no surprise.

Over the years, GAO has raised numerous concerns about DOE's EM office.

Even today, GAO will testify that DOE has not conducted a formal analysis to fully understand the root causes of why these environmental liabilities are growing each year by tens of billions of dollars. If they don't understand what is driving costs, it's difficult to believe they can fully control them.

GAO will also report that EM is still failing to follow best program and best project practices, like having a regularly updated management plan and roadmap; having reliable life-cycle cost estimates and master schedules that are updated on a regular basis; and conducting risk management throughout the life of the program.

I appreciate that many of the challenges facing EM span several Administrations and further that DOE has begun to make changes to how it is attempting to manage these sites.

I also appreciate that Assistant Secretary White will tell us today that she intends to implement many of the recommendations GAO and others have made in recent reports.

But many on this Committee have seen DOE make these promises before with regards to cleanup operations. And yet we are again in this room talking about a program that again needs major management attention.

Finally, beyond the promises, I remain concerned that EM lacks sufficient staff, expertise, and resources to accomplish some of the tasks it will talk about today including implementing the many recommendations GAO has made to improve this program.

To that end, the Trump administration's proposed budget cuts to EM will not make things any better, particularly when it comes to implementing some of the best practices that are being proposed.

So, in conclusion, I hope EM can fully explain to Congress and the American people what is driving the continued increase in DOE's environmental liability but also, whether GAO believes any new DOE proposals will reverse this trend.

Cleaning up these sites is a critically important task of the federal government. Hundreds of billions of tax dollars are at stake. So too is the health and environment of the communities that surround these sites.

This is an area we must get right, and I intend to have this Committee continue paying attention

to this important area.

With that, I yield back.

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