

GAO: Quality assurance problems still hamper nuclear waste dump

The GAO is a harsh critic but usually their announcements are based on elements of fact.

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Quality assurance problems still hinder progress at the nation's proposed nuclear waste dump in Nevada a year after the discovery of alleged paperwork fraud by project scientists, congressional investigators said Thursday.

A reorganization by the Energy Department last October – seven months after the discovery of e-mails indicating government hydrologists falsified documentation of their work to satisfy quality assurance standards – has yet to put the problems at Yucca Mountain to rest and might create new issues, a report by the Government Accountability Office said.

The questions might lead to more delays before the Energy Department can submit an application to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for a license to open the dump 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas, the report said. It's not clear when the dump, approved by Congress in 2002 to store 77,000 tons of the nation's most radioactive nuclear waste, could open, except that it won't be before 2012.

"After more than 20 years of project work, DOE is again faced with substantial quality assurance and other challenges to submit a fully defensible license application to NRC," said the report, requested by Rep. Jon Porter, R-Nev., who released it in Las Vegas. "Unless these challenges are effectively addressed, further delays on the project are likely."

At a news conference in front of a Yucca Mountain project office in Las Vegas, Porter pointed to the title of the 55-page report – "Yucca Mountain: Quality Assurance at DOE's Planned Nuclear Waste Repository Needs Increased Management Attention." He said he hoped it would spur questions at an April 26 hearing he plans to hold as chairman of the Federal Workforce and Agency Organization subcommittee.

"We're putting people at risk," Porter said. "If this was a private sector project, Wall Street would shut it down, and so would local government because of safety concerns."

Energy Department spokesman Craig Stevens in Washington said the department was aware of the issues and already had fixed them or was working toward it.

"At Yucca Mountain, we foster an atmosphere that points out ways we can improve our work and get our job done more effectively," Stevens said in a statement. "This department remains committed to following our obligation under the law to license, construct and operate Yucca Mountain as the nation's permanent repository for spent nuclear fuel."

Among other problems, the GAO report cited high turnover of project managers. It said that nine of 17 key management positions have turned over since 2001 and among the managers lost was the director of quality assurance.

The report also said that despite spending substantial time and money resolving quality assurance issues – including a \$20 million initiative in 2004 – the Energy Department

has not developed effective management tools to detect problems and make sure they're solved. The report recommended strengthening quality guidelines and analysis of problems and making them more consistent.

"Time and time again, this report covers quality assurance," Porter said, "which is the health and safety of Nevadans and the American people."

Last October DOE announced a "new path forward" to improve Yucca Mountain, including redesigning storage containers to minimize handling of nuclear waste, and designating an independent national laboratory to oversee scientific work. The report said the changes will require additional scientific work and could create new management and quality assurance challenges.

"It is too early to determine whether DOE's new effort will resolve quality assurance issues and move the project forward to the submission of a license application," the report said.

A criminal investigation by the Energy Department inspector general is under way into the document falsification, which was allegedly done by U.S. Geological Survey employees from 1998 to 2000. DOE also is reviewing some 14 million e-mails to see if they raise quality assurance concerns, and redoing the scientific work by the Geological Survey hydrologists, who were studying the movement of water through the underground site.

More than 50,000 tons of nuclear wastes destined for the dump is waiting at 72 sites around in the country, mostly at commercial power plants.