

## Rocky Flats cleanup success with some flaws

*A persistent nagging task has been completed.*

Associated Press  
July 10, 2006

Five years ago, an effort to clean up pollution from 40 years of nuclear bomb production at Colorado's Rocky Flats was in serious trouble — behind schedule and over budget.

Monday, congressional investigators praised the Department of Energy for turning the project around, finishing last fall much earlier and at less cost than imagined.

"DOE and the contractor overcame significant challenges" identified in a 2001 government report on the cleanup, investigators with the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, wrote in a 122-page report.

Investigators who examined the cleanup found some problems. For example, they chided the department for not independently checking data used to measure whether the site had been cleaned as specified.

They also said DOE hasn't adequately tracked the lessons it learned at Rocky Flats "thus potentially losing the benefits of such lessons." Still, Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo., who requested the investigation in November 2004, praised the cleanup.

"We were very fortunate to have achieved what we did, in the time we did it in, and at such a cost-savings to the taxpayer," Allard said in a statement.

Located about 16 miles northwest of downtown Denver, Rocky Flats was shut down in 1992 because of safety concerns and the end of the Cold War.

The core plant, covering nearly 400 acres inside a 6,000-acre buffer zone, was severely polluted after 40 years of nuclear weapons production. Workers at the site shaped plutonium into triggers, or "pits," for nuclear bombs.

Kaiser-Hill Co. directed most of the cleanup, which involved processing, packaging and shipping offsite all of Rocky Flats' nuclear material, cleaning and demolishing more than 700 structures and cleaning the site's contaminated soil and groundwater.

Parts of the site will eventually be opened to the public as a federal wildlife refuge, but some areas where the contamination was worst will remain off-limits.

GAO investigators said the total cost was about \$10 billion, including an estimated \$1.3 billion in long-term pension and insurance benefits for the contractor's employees.

The early, lower-cost cleanup was possible partly because of innovative techniques and financial incentive fees offered to the contractor, the report found.

But investigators wrote that they found it "troubling" that the department failed to independently check data used to determine whether the site was adequately cleaned.

However, investigators said they reviewed the contractor's quality controls and found them "robust."