


GAO
 Accountability • Integrity • Reliability
Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-03-558](#), a report to the Honorable Ellen Tauscher, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Energy's (DOE) Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in Livermore, California, generates radioactive and hazardous wastes in the course of its research dealing with nuclear weapons. The laboratory's new Decontamination and Waste Treatment Facility is a \$62 million complex that includes buildings designed for both temporarily storing waste and treating it for off-site disposal. Although construction was completed in 2001, the storage building did not begin operating until September 2002, and the treatment buildings remain unused to this day. GAO was asked to identify the cause of the delay in initiating storage and treatment operations at the facility, the effects of the delay in initiating treatment operations, and the steps taken to ensure that the latest estimated date for initiating treatment operations at the facility can be met.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-558.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

RADIOACTIVE WASTE

DOE Has Acted to Address Delay in New Facility at Livermore Laboratory, but Challenges Remain

What GAO Found

The delay in initiating storage and treatment operations at the new facility occurred because DOE managers did not ensure timely resolution of disagreements with the laboratory over technical issues affecting safety at the facility's waste storage building. Safety documents must be approved by DOE to ensure the safe operation of nuclear facilities before operations can begin. The review of the storage building safety document lasted a year and resulted in postponement of the review of the safety document for the treatment buildings, which in turn delayed operation of the treatment buildings.

The delay in initiating treatment operations has had two main effects. First, the laboratory has had to continue its waste treatment activities at an older facility, which has fewer environmental and worker protections. Second, the delay in initiating treatment operations has postponed off-site disposal of some of the waste.

DOE and the laboratory have taken or are planning to take steps to address the delay in an effort to begin treatment operations at the new facility by the current deadline of August 2003, but officials believe that meeting the deadline will be challenging. One step that DOE is taking to prevent further delay is to improve its oversight so that any future disagreements are resolved in a timely manner. However, to meet the deadline, the laboratory has compressed the time allowed for other tasks. In this regard, the laboratory has altered the time to prepare for an operational readiness review—a process needed to ensure that the facility will be operated safely—from the normal 6 weeks to 2 weeks. Officials describe the scheduled start date as challenging but achievable.

DOE generally agreed with the accuracy of the report. GAO incorporated DOE's comments as appropriate.

Livermore Laboratory Decontamination and Waste Treatment Facility



Source: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.