



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

Recent audits criticized the Department of the Interior for weaknesses in its controls over environmental liabilities resulting from hazardous waste sites. For example, the Department has not developed policies or procedures for estimating environmental liabilities, and does not have a prioritized list of cleanup activities. The Department initiated an effort to develop a database to capture uniform information for financial reporting purposes.

The Department of the Interior Inspector General initiated an audit to evaluate the Department's processes to identify, track, and prioritize potential hazardous waste sites. Since, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has over 20 years experience with information systems and processes to identify, assess, prioritize, and cost estimate Superfund hazardous waste sites, we worked with the Interior Department's Inspector General to identify relevant promising practices for the Department to consider to improve its processes.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional and Public Liaison at (202) 566-2391.

To view the full report, click on the following link:

www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2005/20050822-2005-P-00020.pdf

EPA Practices for Identifying and Inventorying Hazardous Sites Could Assist Similar Department of the Interior Efforts

What We Found

EPA has several mechanisms in place to discover new sites, including having strong relationships with State offices to obtain new site information. EPA screens sites before including them in its inventory or priority list of sites requiring further action. After identifying a site, EPA performs a preliminary assessment to determine the eligibility for a response action and to prioritize sites for further action. EPA also offers automated screening tools to assist regional staff in assessing and inspecting sites. EPA's Hazard Ranking System scores sites based on the likelihood of release or potential release, the characteristics of site waste, and the people or sensitive environments affected by the release. Following selection of the cleanup remedy, EPA uses a panel of experts to evaluate risks and establish funding priorities for new cleanups. EPA estimates changing project costs throughout the process of prioritizing sites, and balances cost as one of several criteria to choose suitable cleanup options.

The Department of the Interior, as a Federal land manager responsible for addressing hazardous sites on its lands, could apply several practices used by EPA to ensure that the Department addresses its highest priority sites first, including:

Site Discovery

- Consult existing site inventories and work with States, Tribes, and communities to obtain information to identify potential sites.
- Develop and apply user-friendly checklists and templates to gather initial site information and generate consistency in reports by bureau field staff.
- Consult upcoming EPA guidance on preliminary assessments and site inspections at Federal facilities, as well as a web-based hazardous waste compliance assistance center.

Site Assessment and Prioritization

- Develop and apply automated tools to quickly assess sites and provide uniformity. Consider EPA's automated tools as a source of ideas.
- Develop a risk-based prioritization method that ranks health risks and considers land uses, ecological risks, and tribal factors.
- Develop a tracking mechanism for sites the Department sets aside as not requiring cleanup attention, and work with States, Tribes, and communities to stay aware of changing site conditions that warrant reprioritization.

Cost Estimating

- Create a web-based "cost estimating toolbox" as a one-stop resource for bureau field staff to document cost assumptions, and include EPA's sources of information on the costs associated with mining sites.
- Frequently reevaluate and adjust cost estimates throughout cleanups.