



COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE SPACE & TECHNOLOGY

REPUBLICANS

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Randy Weber

Energy Subcommittee Hearing – Nuclear Waste Cleanup: Research and Development Opportunities for the Department of Energy’s Office of Environmental Management

July 13, 2022

Thank you, Chairman Bowman.

The Department of Energy’s Office of Environmental Management or “E-M”, the largest environmental cleanup program in the world, has been charged with the formidable task of managing the environmental legacy of the Cold War. This means cleanup of nuclear contamination resulting from decades of weapons testing and government-sponsored energy research. Their work includes treating millions of gallons of radioactive waste, decommissioning contaminated buildings, and remediating contaminated soil and groundwater.

This is a big job, without a doubt. But while EM has made great progress completing clean up at 92 of 107 sites across the country, the estimated cost of these activities has more than doubled over the last decade.

That means the lifecycle costs for cleanup activities at the remaining 15 sites could reach up to \$720 **billion**.

It is absolutely critical that we get these costs under control. The 15 remaining cleanups are estimated to take decades. If we don’t address our costs and liabilities, they will continue to grow. In other words, things are only going to get worse if we don’t make some changes.

In fact, the Government Accountability Office added the federal government’s environmental liabilities to its “High Risk List” in 2017, meaning EM’s programs are among the most vulnerable to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement. It has remained on this list ever since.

But today’s hearing will focus mainly on the positives by exploring strategies for EM to leverage innovation that will shorten cleanup times and help it perform its decontamination work safely, more efficiently, and hopefully at a cheaper cost to the taxpayer.

As part of our efforts to encourage EM's use of R&D to address the greatest challenges at remaining cleanup sites, Congress has called on both the National Academies and GAO to assess strategies to improve EM's efforts.

In its 2019 assessment, a National Academies committee found that EM's management of its science and technology activities is uncoordinated across its sites. It also found that EM demonstrated "little to no interest" in science and technology development that could contribute to the development of breakthrough technologies. That certainly sounds like a huge missed opportunity to me.

In GAO's 2021 report, they reported some alarming findings, such as the lack of a common definition of R&D for EM, and no systematic efforts to track expenditures or prioritize needs across the EM complex. Furthermore, GAO found that EM lacked any systematic method for evaluating the investments in R&D that it did make.

But hopefully today's hearing is the first step in a brighter outlook for the future. I look forward to hearing more about the recommendations from GAO and the National Academies, as well as EM's efforts to implement them. In addition, I want to encourage EM to better collaborate with other relevant program offices across the Department.

The Office of Science, the Office of Nuclear Energy, and other programs at DOE are already tackling today's toughest research challenges and pursuing cutting-edge technologies. It would certainly make sense that these offices, including the world-class facilities at the National Labs, coordinate and collaborate with EM to reduce cleanup costs and time.

And on that note, I look forward to hearing how the Savannah River National Laboratory, EM's only National Laboratory, is supporting cleanup efforts across the country. In managing this Lab, Battelle Memorial Institute has partnered with five universities and two small businesses.

I hope we can identify other opportunities for stakeholders to collaborate in addressing environmental cleanup challenges.

I thank all of our witnesses for being here today and lending your expertise on this issue. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back the balance of my time.