

## AN OVERVIEW OF OTA'S WORK ON EVALUATING THE WEAPONS COMPLEX CLEANUP PROGRAM

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### ABSTRACT

The operations of the Office of Technology Assessment are discussed in general. In addition, those activities associated with nuclear waste management are reviewed in detail.

### INTRODUCTION

The Office of Technology Assessment has conducted studies and issued reports to the Congress on nuclear waste issues for more than ten years. We released our latest report, titled *Complex Cleanup: The Environmental Legacy of Nuclear Weapons Production*, earlier this month. We continue to provide advice to the Congress on this issue as concerns about safety, health and possible environmental damage from nuclear waste focus the Nation's attention.

The Office of Technology Assessment is a technical arm of the U.S. Congress that conducts studies for the committees at their request. We are advisors to the committees to assist them in their three main functions--to authorize and appropriate funds; to develop new legislation and to provide oversight of the executive agencies.

OTA advises the whole congress but we respond specifically to the needs of committees. In order to initiate a major study we must have a request from a standing committee and we must get approval from the technology assessment board. In addition to our major, formal studies, however, OTA also provides technical and policy advice in many other ways. For example, we issue shorter, technical reports and background papers to committees and members when they are needed to support or expand larger assessments or provide ongoing current analysis during major studies. We also explain and interpret our work for the Congress through briefings, seminars or by testifying at hearings. In such cases we work with both committees and individual members, both the House and Senate.

As advisors to 535 members of Congress, our role is somewhat different from other advisory groups here (except for GAO). One of the major differences is that we must produce material and present it for a variety of audiences. We must span the political spectrum and keep our work as free from bias as possible. One way we do that is to carefully select our own advisory panels [that are part of all complete assessments] to represent a variety of perspectives, views, talents, and backgrounds. After doing this we subject all of our reports to vigorous and critical outside reviews and take care to respond to all comments.

Thus OTA conducts a range of advisory work for the Congress. On the general subject of radioactive waste OTA has undertaken a number of studies over the past 10 years. These studies also represent the range of our work from staff papers to full assessments.

For example, in 1982 we published a report titled *Managing the Nation's Commercial High-Level Radioactive Waste*. That study began in the late 1970's with many congressional committees as requesters. The 1982 report (which was a short summary of key issues) contributed to congressional consideration of the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982. In addition, a final, more extensive technical report on the subject was released by OTA in 1985 as a document to assist Congressional oversight on the implementation of the Nuclear Waste Policy Act. We continued to advise Congress on this work for a number of years after.

As an outgrowth of the 1985 assessment, several committees asked OTA to investigate subseabed disposal of high-level radioactive waste. We completed a short study of this issue and published a staff paper in 1986.

In 1988 and 1989 OTA conducted a study of low-level commercial radioactive waste at the request of committees who were concerned about progress in the various states in meeting storage and disposal goals set forth in the Low-Level Waste Policy Act Amendments of 1985. OTA produced two reports on the general issue--one background paper discussing management options for greater-than-Class "C" waste (in 1988) and one full assessment in 1989 titled *Partnerships Under Pressure: Managing Commercial Low-Level Radioactive Waste*.

OTA began to be involved with nuclear waste from weapons production in early 1989 with a request from the Senate Armed Services Committee to review the Department of Energy's Nuclear Weapons Complex Modernization Report. We completed a short staff paper on this in April 1989.

Our most recent nuclear waste assessment--*Complex Cleanup*--was released just two weeks ago. This study was requested by the Senate Committee on Armed Services, who asked OTA to evaluate what is known about the contamination and public health problems at the Nuclear Weapons Complex and to investigate technological and other approaches to solutions. They were concerned about the size and nature of the problem, about defining the time, effort and resources required for an acceptable solution, and about the capabilities and credibility of the DOE plans.

We initiated the study in the fall of 1989 after earlier approval by the OTA Technology Assessment Board. We completed most of the analytical work in late 1990. The

information gathering was accomplished by a combination of literature research and site visits with interviews. The OTA process always includes consulting with various experts and others involved with a range of interests and views on the subject. Our main advisory panel for this study included relevant technical and scientific disciplines as well as persons with affiliations in the regions where many of the weapons plants were located. The panel helped us frame the initial research agenda; they reviewed our initial analyses about halfway through the study; and they reviewed our final report. We also assembled experts to participate in workshops that investigated such subjects as public health effects and remediation technologies. We held seminars throughout the study for receiving expert advice on subjects such as radiation standards, State regulatory systems, priority systems, and the DOE environmental surveys. We also visited the major weapons complex facilities, inspected the work that was underway in environmental restoration and waste management, and interviewed some of the key managers of the field programs.

In the course of this assessment, OTA visited and toured practically all of the weapons sites, attended or participated in dozens of meetings, forums and seminars, listened to congressional testimony, and conducted innumerable interviews in person, by telephone and in writing, with nearly all of the interested parties in waste management and environmental restoration, including DOE officials and their contractors, state officials, national, regional and local environmental and other citizen group representatives, in-

dustry representatives, technical and scientific experts, and congressional staff.

We sought and received comments on our draft report in the fall of last year from many inside and outside advisors. We have thus prepared a document that reflects views and concerns from a variety of affected parties--the DOE, the Federal regulators, the technical and scientific community, the States and local communities, and others. The information presented has been checked by the originators as much as possible and updated through the end of 1990. We have devoted significant efforts to blend scientific and technical challenges with public policy choices.

### CONCLUSION

We are now in the process of delivering this report and explaining our findings to the Congress. This will probably be accomplished over the next several months. We are currently presenting information to interested committees who may be considering new legislation or oversight hearings. Some questions from committees or members will require additional analysis and possibly additional short reports [or background papers]. We have already committed to producing two background papers--one on HLW and TRU waste management--the other on cleanup worker health issues. Because of the high visibility of the Weapons Complex Cleanup and the potentially very high price tag--I would expect that OTA will be continuing to advise the Congress on this issue for some time to come.