

ONE HUNDRED TWELFTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
2125 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-2927
Minority (202) 225-3641

June 26, 2012

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

The Department of Energy (DOE) Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), one of the nation's three nuclear weapons design laboratories managed and operated by contractors, is responsible for maintaining a significant portion of the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile and for supporting a limited production mission for nuclear weapons components. These activities result in the generation of radioactive waste that must be disposed of properly. LANL's two major radioactive waste capabilities—the Radioactive Liquid Waste Treatment Facility (RLWTF) and the Transuranic (TRU) waste capability—are considered so essential that if they were unable to operate for more than five business days, LANL's operations would be significantly impacted.

DOE's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) has for a number of years planned to upgrade or replace both radioactive waste capabilities at LANL. Unfortunately, the associated projects to accomplish this have experienced problems with cost and schedule estimates. For example, a project to upgrade the 50-year-old RLWTF, which handles radioactive liquid waste including waste generated through the process of manufacturing nuclear weapons components, was started in 2007 to be completed in 2010 to meet mission requirements for the next 50 years. However, safety-related questions about design scope have stalled the project indefinitely. At the same time, plans to commence replacement for the 55-year-old TRU facilities began in 2007 to meet a deadline of December 2015. That project is already delayed until 2017, with a cost range of \$71 million to \$124 million and with additional potential taxpayer liabilities for delays related to environmental cleanup on the site of the existing facility.

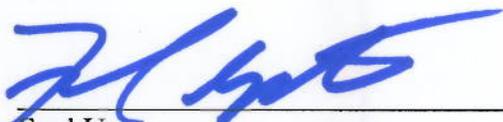
Given these projects' progress to date, the Committee on Energy and Commerce is concerned about NNSA's and LANL's overall radioactive waste management strategy for the site. The importance of radioactive liquid and TRU waste capabilities to LANL's overall mission cannot be underestimated. For these reasons, we request that the Government

Accountability Office (GAO) assist us in ensuring that LANL and NNSA are on the right track. In particular, we request that GAO conduct a study that includes the following:

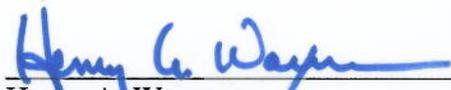
1. A description of the overall radioactive waste management strategy for LANL and, in particular, the mission need for a new RLWTF and TRU Waste Facility. Include in this description an analysis of how this strategy may need to be adapted to reflect changes at the site, such as deferral of construction of the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement-Nuclear Facility.
2. An assessment of the cost and schedule estimates for the RLWTF and TRU Waste Facility projects, especially the extent to which these estimates follow established best practices. Include in this assessment a description of the concerns raised by the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board about the planned RLWTF Upgrade project and the effect of these concerns on the cost and schedule estimates developed.
3. Identification of the challenges, if any, that NNSA and LANL may face in completing these projects within the timeframes necessary to avoid the disruption of operations at the site or other adverse impacts. Include in this (a) an assessment of the likelihood that the TRU Waste Facility will be completed in time to comply with the 2005 Consent Order issued by the New Mexico Environmental Department and (b) the scope of the fines that could be incurred if cleanup is delayed to maintain legacy TRU waste operations. Also include in this assessment the mitigation strategies that may be in place to address any gap in TRU waste handling, to support mission needs.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this request. Please work with Mr. Peter Spencer of the Majority Committee staff and Ms. Tiffany Benjamin of the Minority Committee staff on the specifics of your study. The Committee requests that GAO begin this work as soon as possible.

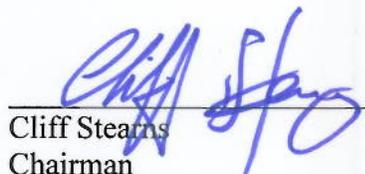
Sincerely,



Fred Upton
Chairman



Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member



Cliff Stearns
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight
and Investigations



Diana DeGette
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight
and Investigations