

GAO: Nuke Weapons Sites Remain Vulnerable

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WASHINGTON - Security upgrades ordered at nuclear weapons sites after the Sept. 11 attacks may not be fully in place for five more years, auditors say.

The delay has led to the possibility that plutonium and weapons-grade uranium might have to be removed from some facilities.

Investigators with the General Accounting Office said Tuesday the Energy Department's 2006 deadline for meeting its new security requirements at weapons labs and other facilities probably is not realistic, short by possibly as much as three years.

At the same time even that program, based on assumptions developed last year about the kind of terrorist assault that might be expected given the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, is being revised, administration and congressional officials acknowledged.

For the first time, the Energy Department is asking security planners to prepare for the possibility that a terrorist would try to take over a facility holding nuclear material, barricade himself inside and try to fashion a crude nuclear weapon and detonate it in a suicide attack.

Security plans previously have been designed under an assumption that a terrorist would break in to steal the material and could be thwarted on the way out.

Some lawmakers and private watchdog groups have said that some facilities would be impossible to defend against a suicide assault and that plutonium and highly enriched uranium at those sites should be relocated.

Rep. Christopher Shays, R-Conn., asked why it took nearly two years after the attacks in New York and at the Pentagon for the Energy Department to develop its revised May 2003 assessment of the kinds of terror attacks security forces probably would have to defend against. He also wanted to know why it will take another two to five years to deal with the increased risks.

"We know the terrorists will not wait that long to try to exploit lingering vulnerabilities in our nuclear complex defenses," said Shays, chairman of the House Government Reform subcommittee dealing with nuclear security.

Energy Department officials acknowledged their latest security plans won't be fully in place everywhere the government has weapons-grade material until the end of 2006. They characterized the GAO assessment that another three years might be needed as overly pessimistic.

"Today, no nuclear weapons, special nuclear material or classified materials are at risk anywhere within the nuclear weapons complex," Linton Brooks, head of the DOE's National Nuclear Security Administration, told the subcommittee members.

Brooks acknowledged risk always exists but assured the lawmakers, "People looking for a soft spot would be ill-advised" to target DOE facilities. "There are no soft spots."

Shays said that some of the sites should be closed, or at least their nuclear materials transferred elsewhere. It "should have been immediately obvious" that the government "has too many facilities housing nuclear materials" and that consolidation is needed.

Plutonium and weapons-grade uranium are being kept at nearly a dozen facilities within the DOE weapons complex including five national laboratories.

Brooks said the department is reviewing the weapons complex to determine where material can be consolidated, either in more secure areas within facilities or at other sites. Plans already are in place to move plutonium from the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico to the Nevada Test Site.

"But consolidation is not a panacea," Brooks said.

He said he opposes moving the plutonium at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California to another location, for example, because scientists there need the material to assess the weapons stockpile properly. To move material from another DOE facility, the Y-12 complex near Oak Ridge, Tenn., could take decades, probably cost billions of dollars and accomplish little in the short term, Brooks said. Current plans would consolidate the material within the Y-12 complex.

Citizen groups and watchdog organizations have singled out Lawrence Livermore, near residential areas 40 miles from San Francisco, and the expansive Y-12 complex as among sites having significant security shortcomings.

"Both face serious physical security challenges, perhaps insurmountable challenges," testified Danielle Brian, executive director of the Project on Government Oversight, a private watchdog group that has worked on security at weapons complex facilities with government whistle-blowers.

"Clearly they will not be able to comply with the new (security) directives," Brian maintained.

In addition to Los Alamos, Lawrence Livermore and Y-13, weapons-grade nuclear materials are at the Hanford reservation in Washington state; Rocky Flats facility in Colorado; Savannah River complex in South Carolina; the Pantex facility in Texas; Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory; the Argonne National Laboratory in Idaho; and Sandia National Laboratory in New Mexico.