

Internal watchdog says EPA mismanaging toxic site cleanups

September 20 2017, by Dan Elliott And Michael Biesecker

Cleanups at some U.S. hazardous waste sites have stopped or slowed down because the Environmental Protection Agency does not manage its Superfund staff effectively to match its workload, an internal government watchdog said Tuesday.

Such work is at a standstill or moving slowly on at least four Superfund sites where "[human exposure](#) is not under control," according to a report from the EPA's inspector general. That means contamination at the sites is unsafe for humans and there is a reasonable expectation that people may be exposed to it, the report said.

The report comes as EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt has said the cleanup up of more than 1,300 listed Superfund sites is a priority.

Though President Donald Trump's proposed 2018 budget seeks to cut the Superfund program by 30 percent, Pruitt has insisted he can do more with less money through better management. He formed a committee to study the issue, adopting 42 recommendations. Pruitt has said he will give priority to sites that can be redeveloped or have nearby residents under threat from the spread of harmful chemicals.

Federal money for Superfund is already about half what it was in the 1990s. Though the federal government often goes to court to force those responsible for the pollution to pay, that sometimes fails, leaving taxpayers on the hook. The majority of cleanup money has been spent in just seven highly industrialized states, topped by New Jersey.

The inspector general review was conducted from February 2016 to July 2017, covering the last months of the Obama administration and the early months of Trump's.

The report said EPA's Region 10, which includes Idaho, Oregon and Washington, had stopped or slowed work at 49 Superfund sites because of a shortage of staff.

The report pointed to the languishing cleanup of the Lower Duwamish Waterway in Seattle. Eating some fish and shellfish from the river could expose humans to high levels of hazardous chemicals, and even though the state has posted warnings, some people don't heed them, the report said.

More than half of EPA's regions reported they could not start work or had to stop work on cleanup projects because of a lack of staff, according to the findings. At least some of those projects are under the Superfund program, which takes on sites that are generally among the most dangerous to humans or the environment.

The report did not list the sites affected, but it did cite another example, the Silver Bow-Butte Area Superfund site in Butte, Montana. A staff shortage has kept the EPA from starting some cleanup work there. The EPA said it does not have enough data yet to determine whether the site qualifies as one where "human exposure is not under control."

The EPA has made only marginal changes in the way its Superfund workforce is distributed nationally in the past 30 years, the report said. It said EPA managers believe that frequently reshuffling the staff would be disruptive.

EPA did not respond to a request for comment Tuesday. In a response included with the inspector general's [report](#), the agency agreed to

develop a plan to redistribute its Superfund workforce.

EPA also agreed to review how the Army and Navy assign priority to environmental [cleanup](#) projects at military sites and periodically shift employees to match the list. The [inspector general](#) suggested EPA could learn from them.

More information: Report: bit.ly/2wERJGa

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