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GAO: Congressional Action Needed on West Valley Nuclear Waste Cleanup

A commercial facility in western New York known as the **West Valley Demonstration Project** reprocessed used nuclear fuel into usable nuclear material. It closed in 1976 but wastes remain and there are no facilities authorized to accept this waste.

In 1980, Congress directed the Department of Energy (DOE) to clean up part of the site. The site contained 600,000 gallons of liquid high-level waste, radioactively contaminated structures and soils, and buried radioactive waste. In 2011, DOE began the first phase of its decommissioning plan, which included demolishing above-ground structures and removing contaminated soils.

To date, DOE has demolished 51 of 55 structures, shipped 1.3 million cubic feet of radioactive waste off-site for disposal, and put other radioactive waste in interim storage on site.

As of February 2020, DOE reported spending about \$3.1 billion on contracted cleanup activities, but a Government Accountability Office (GAO) review found the Department cannot estimate the cleanup's final cost until it decides how it will address the remaining waste.

DOE has been unable to dispose of the high-level and transuranic wastes stored at **West Valley** because there are no facilities authorized to accept these wastes. DOE told GAO that it has identified two potential options for disposal of the transuranic waste: the federal Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico and a commercial facility in Texas. However, the New Mexico facility is authorized to accept only waste from atomic energy defense activities, and DOE does not consider **West Valley** waste to be from atomic energy defense activities. Regarding the Texas facility, state regulations preclude disposal of the waste there.

In 2017, DOE submitted to Congress a report on all disposal options, as required by the Energy Policy Act of 2005. Pursuant to this act, DOE must await action by Congress before making a final decision, and Congress has not yet acted.

GAO therefore urges Congress to consider taking action to indicate how DOE should proceed with the disposal of **West Valley**'s transuranic waste and, if necessary, to amend the appropriate federal legislation to create a legal pathway for its disposal.

[Read the full report at GAO](#)



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