

Nuclear Test Readiness at Risk, DOE Reports

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The Energy Department's ability to resume full-scale nuclear testing within 36 months is at risk due to the loss of experienced employees, dismantled facilities, and unusable equipment, according to a report by the department's Office of Inspector General (IG). The department is required to be able to conduct a nuclear test within three years of receiving an order from the president to resume testing.

The report, released September 9, harshly criticized the department's National Nuclear Security Administration's (NNSA) management of the test readiness program, noting a significant lack of planning to fill key roles and update equipment. The audit asserted that NNSA "did not have a comprehensive plan or methodology in place to address its most significant test-related concerns."

Lack of personnel with testing experience was a chief problem listed in the report, which cited a 50 percent loss of such employees in the past five years. Physical assets, such as computer equipment and diagnostic tools used during testing, are in disrepair or obsolete. In addition, computer modeling to determine the site's readiness has not been updated to reflect changes in personnel, facilities, and safety requirements over the last 10 years.

In an accompanying memorandum addressing the report's findings, NNSA Deputy Administrator for Defense Programs Everet H. Beckner defended the agency, saying, "NNSA is confident that the weapons complex could resume testing on a time scale appropriate" to deal with any potential problem. Other Energy Department management comments noted that the audit focused only on the Nevada Test Site's preparedness when it is the national weapons laboratories that have the greatest technical capabilities to conduct nuclear tests.

The IG report was issued as Congress contemplates reducing the time required to resume nuclear testing as part of the FY 2003 defense authorization and appropriations bills. Both the Senate and the House of Representatives approved \$15 million to enhance test readiness, but only the House authorization bill calls for the ability to resume underground nuclear weapons testing within 12 months.

Given the current state of the test site's facilities and annual funding level of \$10 million, it would be "an ever greater challenge to meet a smaller window" of test readiness time, according to an Energy official familiar with the report.

The audit was conducted from September 2001 to July 2002 and involved interviews with over 70 current and former employees, visits to the Nevada Test Site and the North Las Vegas Facility, and reviews of policies and procedures.

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