

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106479](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

EM relies on federal staff to oversee its nuclear waste cleanup from decades of nuclear weapons production and research at locations across the country. EM's mission includes deactivating and decommissioning contaminated buildings, remediating contaminated soil and groundwater, and treating radioactive liquid waste.

Senate Report 117-130 accompanying S. 4543, a bill related to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 included a provision for GAO to report on EM's workforce capacity. GAO examined whether EM's federal staff levels align with identified needs to meet EM's mission, and the extent to which EM conducts workforce planning and takes actions to recruit, hire, develop, and retain the personnel it needs.

GAO reviewed documents and prior assessments related to EM's workforce management, analyzed human capital data for fiscal years 2014 through 2023, and interviewed DOE and EM officials, including hiring managers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that Congress consider requiring EM to report annually on its efforts to address recurring workforce problems. GAO is also making 10 recommendations to EM to improve its workforce management, including that it develop a forward-looking workforce plan and update agreements with DOE's Shared Service Center. EM agreed with all of GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106479](#). For more information, contact Nathan Anderson at (202) 512-3841 or andersonn@gao.gov.

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NUCLEAR WASTE CLEANUP

Changes Needed to Address Current and Growing Shortages in Mission-Critical Positions

What GAO Found

The Department of Energy's (DOE) Office of Environmental Management (EM) continues to be understaffed. At the end of fiscal year 2023, EM had 263 vacant positions. Moreover, EM had an overall 18 percent vacancy rate for its 14 mission-critical job series (see table). EM's workforce is also aging—44 percent of its staff will be eligible for retirement by 2030. EM workforce management challenges have caused project failures and affected the mission through schedule delays, cost overruns, and workplace accidents, according to DOE assessments. These assessments found that additional failures are likely without efforts to address workforce challenges.

Federal Staff in Selected Mission-Critical Occupations at the Department of Energy's Office of Environmental Management (EM), as of the End of Fiscal Year 2023

Occupational group	Onboard staff in October 2023	Vacancies	Vacancy rate ^a	Retirement eligibility rate by 2030 ^a
General Engineering	251	95 ^b	27%	35%
Nuclear Engineering	36	5	12%	56%
Contracting	141	38	21%	27%
General Physical Science	163	12	7%	45%

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Energy and EM information. | GAO-24-106479

^aThese values are rounded to the nearest whole percent. Vacancy rate pertains to fiscal year 2023.

^bGeneral Engineering includes the vacancies jointly labeled General Engineering/Physical Science. Approximately 55 of these vacancies can be filled by either, while 40 are labeled General Engineering.

EM develops annual staffing plans as requested by DOE but does not have a forward-looking workforce plan. EM, DOE, and others have repeatedly documented the need to strengthen EM's workforce planning because of concerns about mission-critical positions and anticipated retirements. However, EM's attempts to address these issues have proven ineffective. Workforce problems have recurred in multiple locations without EM having taken steps to adopt recommended strategies. By having workforce planning that better follows leading strategic planning practices, such as developing hiring goals and succession planning, EM may be able to mitigate the risks that staffing shortages pose. Further, requiring annual reporting on EM's efforts to address recurring workforce problems could support congressional oversight and help ensure steps are taken to address these problems.

EM has taken some actions to recruit, hire, develop, and retain personnel, but these have been insufficient to counter attrition—10.6 percent in fiscal year 2023. Communication breakdowns between EM and DOE's Shared Service Center have also hampered EM's workforce management efforts and could be improved by better aligning with leading collaboration practices, such as updating documented collaboration agreements.