EPA Needs Better Data to Forecast Superfund Cleanup Costs, GAO Says

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) does not provide sufficiently detailed information on the status and cost of site cleanups for Congress to forecast the program’s funding needs, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report. GAO said Congress would have “a clearer understanding of how much funding for future cleanups would have to come from trust fund appropriations rather than from responsible parties,” if it had better information. The superfund trust fund, established under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act of 1980, was actually depleted in 2003, but general appropriations have funded the superfund program since then. Reauthorizing the “polluter pays” tax has been an issue since that tax expired in 1995. The Obama administration is on record in support of reinstating the tax, effective in fiscal year 2011. Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.), ranking member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, opposes reinstating the tax and commented on the GAO findings. Inhofe said, “Before deciding how much taxpayers should spend to clean up sites, Congress should hold EPA accountable by establishing clear performance metrics to measure success in cleaning up superfund sites.”

EPA Official Solicits Advice on Policy, Rules in Waste Programs

The head of EPA’s hazardous waste cleanup programs is soliciting feedback on how the office can make policymaking more open, develop better strategies for handling waste or cleaning up contaminated sites, and “bring about more community involvement at cleanup sites.” Mathy Stanislaus, assistant EPA administrator for solid waste and emergency response, said in a letter that “I believe that government works best when it listens carefully to the opinions and criticism of interested stakeholders.”

Stanislaus emphasized “greater transparency” in decision making, “more accessibility to information, especially for vulnerable communities,” and a willingness to restructure programs in the agency’s Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response to achieve these goals. Stanislaus also announced his intent to “expand interactions with the public” by hosting video town meetings to give interested groups a chance to speak directly with him and waste office experts. “We will do our best to publicize the meetings so as many stakeholders as possible can participate,” he said. But no schedule has yet been set.

Science Advisers Question Timetable for Review of Clean Air Standards

EPA’s science advisers say they are “very concerned” that the agency’s review of secondary air quality standards for nitrogen dioxide and sulfur dioxide under a deadline set in a consent decree will not result in sufficiently protective standards.

In a letter, the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee (CASAC) raised concerns that the agency would not have the time necessary to evaluate and propose new secondary air quality standards for oxides of sulfur and nitrogen that were sufficient to protect the environment because of the February 2010 deadline. EPA sets primary national ambient air quality standards (NAAQS) to protect public health. The secondary standard is intended to protect public welfare and the environment with nitrogen dioxide currently set at 0.053 parts per million, averaged annually, the same as the primary standard. The secondary standard for sulfur dioxide is 0.5 ppm, averaged over a three-hour period. Oxides of sulfur and nitrogen can cause acidification of soil and water, affecting plant and animal life, according to the second draft of EPA’s second draft risk and exposure assessment. EPA must propose new secondary air quality standards for sulfur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide by February 2010 as part of a consent decree with the Center for Biological Diversity (Center for Biological Diversity v. Johnson, D.D.C., No. 05-1814, consent decree 11/19/07).