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EPA Sees Toxic Waste Sites, Costs Growing

WASHINGTON (AP) - At the current pace of cleanup work, it could take up to 35 years and \$280 billion to fix most of the nation's existing and yet-to-be-discovered hazardous waste sites, the government said Friday.

A report by the Environmental Protection Agency described what taxpayers and private industry will be spending to fix sites contaminated with hazardous waste and petroleum products.

It estimated 77,000 such sites, with up to 9,267 more discovered each year.

"The purpose of the report is to allow us to plan and develop better strategies to meet the nation's cleanup needs," Cynthia Bergman, a spokeswoman for EPA, said.

At that rate, as many as 355,000 hazardous waste sites in the United States could have required cleanups by 2039 - 60 percent more than the 217,000 sites that EPA's last study, in 1996, estimated might be in need of cleanups over 30 years.

EPA had estimated the cleanup cost for those cleanups at up to \$187 billion.

Less than 1 percent of the projected average number of sites that would need to be decontaminated by 2033 are part of EPA's Superfund program for the worst toxic waste messes. Most of the sites, or 43 percent, are underground storage tanks that are leaking or might leak.

By spending, the Superfund sites would account for about 15 percent of the projected average. The biggest portion, or 22 percent, is EPA's program for decontaminating sites with lesser hazards, such as medical, low-grade radioactive and animal wastes.

Other sites include those belonging to the departments of Defense and Energy and other federal agencies, and ones owned by states and private companies or landowners, including low-level pollution sites known as "brownfields" being redeveloped for commercial use.

Federal agencies other than Defense and Energy, such as the departments of Interior, Agriculture and Transportation, have been spending about \$200 million annually for site cleanups, but have up to \$21 billion more of cleanup work to be done over 30 years.

Most of the sites have contaminated soil or groundwater, or both, and contain volatile organic compounds. Among Defense Department and Superfund sites, metals and semivolatile organic compounds are most prevalent, EPA says.

The first time the national report on the cleanup market was issued was in 1993.

EPA emphasized that the numbers are only estimates, and the projections get less reliable the farther out they go in years.

The latest figures range from 235,000 to 355,000 sites over 30 to 35 years, at an estimated cost of \$180 billion to \$280 billion.

Because of that, and how much the numbers have varied from 1996 to now, the report should be viewed with "extreme skepticism," said Matthew Tirman, an environmental health advocate for U.S. Public Interest Research Group, an advocacy organization.

Tirman also noted that "without continued funding, these sites are going to go uncleaned and remain a danger to public health of communities and endangered environmental quality."

On the Net:

EPA report: <http://www.clu-in.org/market>

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