



CALIFORNIA STATE AUDITOR

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FACT SHEET

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The California State Auditor released the following report today:

Low-Level Radioactive Waste

The State Has Limited Information That Hampers Its Ability to Assess the Need for a Disposal Facility and Must Improve its Oversight to Better Protect the Public

BACKGROUND

Hospitals, industry, and other institutions use radioactive materials that produce low-level radioactive waste (waste). Federal law requires these waste generators to dispose of the waste at licensed facilities. The Department of Public Health (department) plays an important role in licensing those who use radioactive materials or radioactive-emitting machines in their work and overseeing the proper disposal of low-level radioactive waste. This oversight includes the decommissioning of equipment or facilities where radioactive materials have been used so that the location may be used for other purposes. In 1987 California joined a four-state compact governed by the Southwestern Low-Level Radioactive Waste Commission (Southwestern Commission), which is charged with ensuring that low-level radioactive waste is safely disposed of and managed within the compact region. As the "host" state, California is charged with establishing a licensed low-level radioactive waste disposal facility that will accommodate the disposal needs of the compact region.

KEY FINDINGS

In our review of the State's approach to managing low-level radioactive waste, we reported the following:

- Despite joining the compact in 1987, California has yet to establish a low-level radioactive waste disposal facility for use by the compact region. In the absence of such a facility:
 - Generators must export low-level radioactive waste for disposal or store it on site. In June 2008 waste generators in California will lose access to one of the two disposal facilities that are currently in use.
 - The Southwestern Commission's role is largely one of approving requests to export low-level radioactive waste out of the compact region.
- The Southwestern Commission's processes for approving requests to export waste do not comply with federal law. For example, rather than approving the exportation of low-level waste by a two-thirds vote of the Southwestern Commission as mandated, the Southwestern Commission delegates impermissibly this authority to the executive director. Further, it allows waste generators to determine whether their low-level waste meets recycling requirements.
- The department has some serious shortcomings in its oversight of low-level radioactive material and waste:
 - More than five years after being directed to do so, the department has yet to adopt certain decommissioning standards that define when a physical location is sufficiently clean from harmful radiation.
 - The department's Radiologic Health Branch (branch) cannot demonstrate that its inspections of those that possess radioactive material and radiation-emitting machines are performed timely in accordance with federal and state requirements.
 - More than five years after the effective date of the law, the branch is still unable to provide required information on the amount of low-level waste generated in California.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The report provided many recommendations to the department regarding its oversight responsibilities. Such recommendations included improvements to its planning processes, data collection, inspections, and providing the Legislature with needed information.

