

EPA

IG shelved audit of troubled radiation center — records

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This photo shows employees at a U.S. EPA lab in Montgomery, Ala., which shares responsibility for the agency's radiation-related work with the National Center for Radiation Field Operations in Las Vegas. U.S. EPA

U.S. EPA's inspector general quietly canceled an audit last year that was supposed to follow up on a withering 2014 internal assessment of the National Center for Radiation Field Operations (NCRFO), according to records obtained by E&E News.

The center "has taken numerous actions to address operational deficiencies and was cleared to resume servicing its external customers in January 2016," Kevin Christensen, assistant inspector general for audits, wrote in a September 2016 [memo](#) informing EPA officials of the decision to scrap the project. "It is premature to review the NCRFO's operations; therefore, the assignment will be closed."

The memo, which wasn't posted on the "project notification" page of the IG's website at the time, was obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request.

In an email last week, IG spokesman Jeffrey Lagda said the document should have been put online but was "unfortunately" missed because of an administrative oversight.

"I guess I'm surprised," Jeff Ruch, executive director of **Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility**, said in an interview this week upon learning of the cancellation. The advocacy group has at times been sharply critical of EPA policies on radiation exposure thresholds and related issues.

Even if the follow-up inquiry had found diminished grounds for concern, Ruch said, "there would be broad public interest in knowing why and how much comfort should be taken in that."

The IG had **announced** the audit in May 2016, with the goal of gauging the status of EPA's efforts to confront long-standing problems "relative to quality assurance requirements and staff technical competencies" at the Las Vegas-based center.

Two years earlier, an internal agency "gap assessment" had faulted broad swaths of the center's operations, ranging from failure to meet basic record-keeping requirements to employees' ability to handle a radiation-related emergency.

"Overall, the motivation to succeed and to be properly prepared to respond to a significant radiological incident is non-existent," the assessment said, adding that there was "significant work to be done" by management and staff before the center could handle a formal audit.

The review also described a workforce dispirited by expectations that the NCRFO would be closed and "resigned to the current climate of low competency, poor operational practices and frequent ethical lapses."

The center, which has about two dozen employees, is billed as "key to EPA's response to radiological emergencies and accidents nationwide," with duties that include assessment of contaminated sites and management of monitoring and communications equipment, according to its website.

Although EPA's radiation-related work makes up a sliver of its overall responsibilities, its profile rose early this decade after a Japanese nuclear disaster focused attention on the federal government's ability to handle a similar mishap in the United States.

In a 2012 report, for example, the IG found that 20 percent of EPA's radiation monitors were out of service when a March 2011 earthquake and tsunami triggered meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

Meanwhile, at the Las Vegas center, then known as the Radiation and Indoor Environments National Laboratory, Ron Fraass had halted all work for states and other "external customers" soon after taking over as director in 2011.

The reason wasn't related to Fukushima, Fraass said in a recent interview, but stemmed from deep-seated quality assurance problems that left the NCRFO incapable of doing what it was supposed to.

The halt, which barred staff from providing radiation measurement help, was lifted only early last year after what Fraass termed "an extremely long process" yielded improvements.

In the meantime, quality assurance concerns also prompted the 2014 internal gap assessment.

EPA didn't make the assessment public. The IG's office provided a copy last year after announcing the follow-up audit.

Oddly, the 16-page [document](#) contained nothing to identify the author or to explain exactly why it was produced. But the records in question show that it had the backing of Michael Flynn, then the head of EPA's Office of Radiation and Indoor Air.

The required task order was tacked onto a contract with Environmental Management Support Inc., a Maryland consulting firm based just outside of Washington, which then used a subcontractor to carry out the assignment.

Some employees and outside observers regarded the resulting report as a hit job intended to justify closure of the center.

'Struggling to understand'

Fraass, who had come to the NCRFO from EPA's sister center for radiation-related work, the National Analytical Radiation Environmental Laboratory in Montgomery, Ala., said he thought the findings were fair and that he wouldn't have moved to the Las Vegas facility if he had thought it would be closed.

"Anytime somebody is questioning your ability to perform your function, you try to decide why," he said of the staff concerns. "One answer is that your function isn't being done well; the other is that somebody is just after me.

"Nobody was after them," said Fraass, who retired early last year on what he described as a previously set timetable.

But the assessment prodded a reorganization that sent the center's lab work to the Montgomery facility, he said, while leaving the renamed NCRFO focused on emergency response. Because of budget constraints, Fraass said, both operations had been losing employees they couldn't replace; trying to do both missions at both places "was no longer going to be workable."

At least at one point, however, the handling of the assessment sparked consternation from the center's deputy director, Andrea Stafford, who wrote in a September 2014 email that she was "completely confused" that Montgomery officials had gone ahead with the final report without first consulting with the NCRFO on possible clarifications or changes.

"I'm struggling to understand this situation and welcome any information or clarifications that you can provide," Stafford said in the message to a Montgomery colleague.

The records obtained by E&E News don't make clear what response, if any, Stafford received. She referred questions last week to EPA's press office.

In a statement provided by a spokeswoman, Jon Edwards, current head of the Office of Radiation and Indoor Air, called the gap analysis "a proactive step in identifying areas for improving quality assurance procedures" that was used to update the NCRFO's documentation processes and create a training certification program for emergency field responders.

"These processes were finalized in 2015," Edwards added, "and are now being successfully implemented."

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