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Foreword

This report was prepared primarily to inform Congressional members and key staff of ongoing assignments in the General Accounting Office's Environmental Protection issue area. This report contains assignments that were ongoing as of August 17, 1998, and presents a brief background statement and a list of key questions to be answered on each assignment. The report will be issued quarterly.

This report was compiled from information available in GAO's internal management information systems. Because the information was downloaded from computerized data bases intended for internal use, some information may appear in abbreviated form.

If you have questions or would like additional information about assignments listed, please contact Peter Guerrero, Director, on (202) 512-6111; or David Wood, Associate Director, on (202) 512-6878.

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MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET

TITLE: **EPA'S CONTRACTS AND GRANTS CLOSEOUT ACTIVITIES (160423)**

KEY QUESTIONS : EPA expends most of its budget through grants and contracts. For years, it has had a backlog of grants and contracts that are completed except for the final administrative close out procedures. These backlogs can cause many problems. Any remaining unused funds are not expeditiously redirected to other approved uses. Also, as time passes, critical documents and key personnel can be difficult to locate. (1) What is the current status of EPA's completed contracts and grants that have not been closed out? (2) What are the impediments to timely closeout of contracts and grants? (3) What has EPA done to eliminate the backlog, and when will the backlog be eliminated? (4) What are the budgetary effects, if any, resulting from the backlog?

TITLE: **REVIEW OD EPA'S COLLECTION, CONTROL, AND PUBLIC DISSEMINATION OF SENSITIVE BUSINESS INFORMATION (160446)**

KEY QUESTIONS : An Administration priority and a key strategic goal of EPA involves providing additional information to the public to help them more effectively participate in environmental decision making. Concerns have been raised, however, about EPA's handling of sensitive data on industrial operations and the impact that having the information in public data bases can have on business competitiveness. 1. To what extent do EPA's public data bases contain sensitive business information? 2. Which are the most critical data? 3. How is business data compiled by intelligence agents for competitive profiling? 4. To what extent can information in EPA's data bases threaten U.S. competitiveness? 5. How adequately does EPA protect sensitive business data? 6. What options exist to better protect the data?

TITLE: **EPA'S SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FUNDS IN 1999 BUDGET REQUEST (160450)**

KEY QUESTIONS : EPA organized its fiscal year 1999 budget justification by its strategic goals and objectives rather than appropriation accounts. This reorganization considerably changed how the justification shows the funds being requested for the Science and Technology account in the President's budget. (1) Where are the amounts requested for the Science and Technology account located in the EPA's budget justification? (2) What EPA program offices are to administer the funds? (3) What process or available information can be used to readily compare account funds to EPA's budget justifications for current and prior years?

TITLE: **REVIEW OF SUPERFUND EXPENDITURES BY THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND THE AGENCY FOR TOXIC SUBSTANCES AND DISEASE REGISTRY (160451)**

KEY QUESTIONS : About 20 percent of the $1.5 billion Superfund budget is used for legal proceedings and for investigating and characterizing the toxicity of Superfund sites. These activities are carried out, in part, by the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). (1) What amount of Superfund resources have been allocated and expended by DOJ and ATSDR for the last several years, and for what purpose? (2) What internal controls do EPA, DOJ, and ATSDR have to ensure that these resources are expended for appropriate Superfund activities? (3) What performance measures do EPA, DOJ, and ATSDR use to assess the effective and efficient use of these resources and what do these measures show?

TITLE: **EPA FISCAL YEAR 1999 BUDGET: SUPERFUND, CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION PLAN, AND ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING FOR PUBLIC ACCESS AND COMMUNITY TRACKING (EMPACT) PROGRAMS (160458)**

KEY QUESTIONS : EPA's fiscal year 1999 budget requests $2.1 billion to fund major initiatives relating to the acceleration of toxic waste cleanups under the Superfund program, reduction of industry greenhouse gas emissions under the Climate Change Action Plan, and expansion of citizen's right-to-know about local environmental risks under the Environmental Monitoring for Public Access and Community Tracking (EMPACT) program. The amounts requested represent an increase of approximately $682.4 million over the $1.42 billion appropriated for fiscal year 1998. (1) Is EPA's budget justification to the Congress for these significant funding increases in the Superfund, Climate Change, and EMPACT programs fully supported by agency analyses and plans for use of the funds?

ENVIRONMENTAL REAUTHORIZATION ISSUES

TITLE: **CHARACTERISTICS OF HAZARDOUS WASTE SITES AWAITING A DECISION FOR PLACEMENT ON EPA'S NATIONAL PRIORITIES LIST (160386)**

KEY QUESTIONS : In 1980, the Superfund program was established to clean up highly contaminated hazardous waste sites. As of April 1997, there were 1,206 sites on the National Priorities List (NPL), EPA's list of the worst known contaminated sites. EPA has an inventory of almost 2,800 hazardous waste sites awaiting a decision as to whether they will be placed on the NPL. The number of future sites on the NPL is a key issue in the debate regarding reauthorization of the Superfund program. (1) what are the characteristics of the hazardous waste sites potentially going on the NPL? (2) what cleanup activities have already occurred at these sites? and (3) what are states' estimates of how many of these sites will eventually be placed on the NPL?

TITLE: **STATUS AND PROGRESS OF THE SUPERFUND PROGRAM (160407)**

KEY QUESTIONS : The Superfund program is focused on cleaning up the nation's worst hazardous waste sites. Currently, there are over 1300 Superfund sites in various stages of the cleanup process. Concerns have been raised regarding the current status and progress of the Superfund program. (1) What progress has the Superfund program made in remedy selection decisions and designing remedies at NPL sites, according to Superfund data base information dated September 30, 1997? (2) Is the data obtained from the EPA data base accurate?

TITLE: **SUPERFUND: ANALYSIS OF CONTRACTOR COSTS AT SUPERFUND SITES (160413)**

KEY QUESTIONS : As we recently reported (GAO/RCED-97-211), under the Superfund program EPA pays contractors several hundred million dollars a year to implement cleanup actions (called remedial actions) at the nation's worst hazardous waste sites. EPA may directly hire and oversee remedial contractors. Alternatively, EPA may arrange to have these functions performed by another federal agency (such as the Corps of Engineers) or by a state. (1) Over the past two years, what share of contractor remedial spending was administered by EPA, other federal agencies, and the states? (2) For cost-reimbursable remedial actions administered by EPA or the Corps, how much of the cleanup spending was for labor, equipment, travel, overhead, general and administrative costs, fees, subcontractors, and other costs?

TITLE: **ASSESSMENT OF DATA ON THE EXTENT OF NONPOINT SOURCE POLLUTION AND FEDERAL NONPOINT SOURCE PROGRAMS AND FUNDING (160425)**

KEY QUESTIONS : There is consensus that nonpoint source (NPS) pollution--which comes from diffused sources such as agricultural runoff--is one of the largest remaining challenges to cleaning up our surface waters. How to deal with NPS pollution promises to be a key issue in Clean Water Act reauthorization. 1. What federal programs and Clean Water Act sections primarily address NPS pollution, what have been funding levels for these for the past 5 fiscal years, and how are funds provided under the Clean Water Act allocated? 2. How much NPS pollution comes from federal facilities and lands and federally-permitted activities? 3. What methodology does EPA use to estimate the costs for reducing NPS pollution in its 'Needs Survey' and what elements should be included in a framework for assessing such costs?

TITLE: **STATUS OF PHYSICAL WORK ACCOMPLISHED AND TO BE ACCOMPLISHED AT NPL SITES THAT HAVE NOT YET REACHED CONSTRUCTION COMPLETE STAGE (160438)**

KEY QUESTIONS : In 1980, Congress established Superfund to clean up highly contaminated hazardous waste sites. Since then, EPA and private parties have spent billions of dollars and still have more than 1,350 sites on its national priority list of sites to address, although about 500 have completed construction of the cleanup method. Because of concerns about the pace and cost of cleanups, the Congress would like to know what cleanup work has been accomplished and still remains at the more than 700 noncompleted sites. Specifically, GAO will determine the type and amount of physical cleanup action that (1) has been accomplished at each area of contamination, or operable unit, within each site, and (2) remains to be completed, including the projected date this action will commence.

TITLE: **HIGH RISK AREA 14: HIGH RISK IV (160443)**

KEY QUESTIONS : EPA has spent almost $18 billion on its Superfund program, cleaning up more than 500 hazardous waste sites. EPA could spend billions more completing the more than 700 sites in its cleanup pipeline and assessing the thousands more sites awaiting a cleanup decision. Because of this potential investment, we will continue to assess three issues identified in our High-Risk work concerning EPA's management of this program: (1) Have EPA and other federal agencies prioritized their Superfund cleanups using risk? (2) Has EPA improved its process for recovering dollars spent to clean up sites where viable and liable parties exist? (3) What is the status of EPA's efforts to improve contract management, specifically in estimating, controlling, and auditing contract costs?

TITLE: **BROWNFIELD NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP'S FUNDING AND IMPLEMENTATION (160452)**

KEY QUESTIONS : In May 1997, the Administration initiated the National Partnership Action Agenda to focus federal agencies' attention on brownfields, which are abandoned, idled, or underused industrial and commercial properties where expansion or redevelopment is complicated by concerns that they have been contaminated and will need cleaning up. Eight federal agencies committed $300 million and $165 million in loan guarantees to the agenda. (1) How much of this commitment did agencies actually spend for brownfield-related activities in fiscal years 1997 and 1998 and for what purposes? (2) What are the goals and objectives of the action agenda, and what strategies and measures are in place to help ensure that these goals and objectives are achieved?

TITLE: **INFORMATION ON POTENTIAL SUPERFUND NATIONAL PRIORITIES LIST SITES (160456)**

KEY QUESTIONS : EPA has proposed 33 contaminated sites for the National Priorities List (NPL), the agency's list of the most hazardous sites for cleanup under the Superfund program. An additional 1,800 sites are eligible for the list. Information on the threat posed by these sites, cleanup actions already taken or underway, and future cleanup plans is important for determining the future size of the Superfund program. For each site, we will address three principal questions: (1) What are its characteristics, such as types of contamination and health and environmental risks? (2) What actions have been taken to clean it up? (3) What is the site's likely final disposition, including whether it is expected to be added to the NPL?

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

TITLE: **REVIEW OF IMPACT OF NEW SDWA PROVISIONS REGARDING NON-PUBLIC WATER SYSTEMS (160405)**

KEY QUESTIONS : The 1996 amendments to the Safe Drinking Water Act expanded the definition of public water system to include suppliers, such as irrigation districts, that deliver water for human consumption through "constructed conveyances" other than pipes. However, such suppliers can be excluded from regulation if they meet certain requirements. On the basis of the amendments and discussions with committee staff, we agreed to report on (1) the number and location of households that rely on special purpose water systems for their residential water; (2) the costs and affordability (to users and systems) of existing and alternative water sources; and (3) implementation issues that could affect states' and water systems' ability to achieve compliance.

TITLE: **REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EPA'S TOXIC RELEASE INVENTORY/COMMUNITY RIGHT-TO-KNOW PROGRAM IN PROVIDING LOCAL COMMUNITIES WITH INFORMATION ON TOXIC CHEMICALS (160416)**

KEY QUESTIONS : The Toxic Release Inventory (TRI) is a major component of EPA's efforts to involve the public in environmental protection. Although TRI provides data on the amount of releases of over 600 toxic chemicals, it does not contain information on the risk posed by these releases. Similarly, substantial data on hazardous chemicals are reported by industry to state and local emergency planning organizations under Sections 311 and 312 of the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act. Concerns, however, have been raised about the availability of the data to the public. (1) What is the status of EPA's efforts to provide the public with risk-related information on toxic chemical releases? (2) How can the Section 311/312 information be made more accessible and useful to the public?

TITLE: **REVIEW OF DOE'S SEPTEMBER 1997 FIVE LABORATORIES' STUDY (160422)**

KEY QUESTIONS : Part of the President's proposal for curbing greenhouse gas emissions was based on a September 1997 study by five Department of Energy (DOE) Laboratories. The Energy Information Administration (EIA), the Environmental Protection Agency, and others have questioned key aspects of the Five Lab study, including the reasonableness of several key assumptions and their collective impact on the study's conclusions. (1) What are the objectives, key assumptions, conclusions and limitations of the DOE study? and (2) To what extent were the study's conclusions reflected in the Administration's October 1997 climate change proposal and in the December 1997 Kyoto Conference's goals for reducing carbon dioxide emissions in the United States?

TITLE: **EPA'S IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 1996 AMENDMENTS TO THE SAFE DRINKING WATER ACT (160437)**

KEY QUESTIONS : The 1996 amendments to the Safe Drinking Water Act focus on improving the way that EPA sets drinking water safety standards and develops regulations, providing better information to consumers, expanding funding for states and communities through a Drinking Water State Revolving Fund, and establishing new prevention approaches to better protect drinking water supplies. (1) What is the status of efforts by EPA, the states, and the nation's public water supply systems to implement the amendments? (2) What are the key issues and potential problems facing them in their efforts to do so?

TITLE: **ECONOMIC IMPACT OF EPA'S PROPOSED EFFLUENT GUIDELINES AND PRETREATMENT STANDARDS FOR INDUSTRIAL LAUNDRIES (160444)**

KEY QUESTIONS : EPA has estimated it will cost the private sector $93.9 million annually to comply with the agency's proposed Effluent Guidelines and Pretreatment Standards for Industrial Laundries. Industry, however, estimates the cost of this rule will be as high as $401 million annually. (1) Why are there significant differences in EPA's and industry's cost estimates of this proposed regulation? (2) How did EPA estimate the benefits of the proposed rule and disclose the uncertainties associated with the accuracy of its estimates? (3) How well does EPA's cost-benefit analysis support its conclusion that the agency satisfied the Unfunded Mandates Reform Act's requirement to select "the least costly, most cost-effective, or least burdensome alternative that achieves the objectives of the rule?"

TITLE: **REVIEW OF SELECTED ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH THE NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE PARTNERSHIP SYSTEM (160447)**

KEY QUESTIONS : EPA is using Performance Partnership Agreements and Performance Partnership Grants as key elements of a new working relationship with the states that is to focus more on results than on administrative management and oversight. Under this National Environmental Performance Partnership System, EPA and states develop performance measures which are incorporated into the agreements and grants. (1) To what extent are use of these agreements and grants achieving the benefits envisioned for states and the public? (2) How has EPA's oversight changed in states where the agreements and grants are being used? (3) What progress have EPA and the states made in developing results-oriented performance measures?

TITLE: **INDOOR AIR RESEARCH: FUNDING HISTORY, SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS, NEEDS, PRIORITIES, AND FUTURE COST ESTIMATES (160448)**

KEY QUESTIONS : In recent years various comparative risk studies have ranked indoor air pollution among the top 5 environmental risks to public health. Because efforts to address the indoor air environment are widely distributed across EPA offices and other federal agencies, there has not been an integrated approach taken to ensure that critical research needs are being addressed in a way to make the most effective use of limited resources. (1) What is the status of EPA's efforts to develop an indoor air research plan that includes research needs, priorities, and coordination with others? (2) What level of resources have EPA and other key federal agencies devoted to indoor air research in recent years?