

EM 45-day review

As of this writing, the Trump administration had yet to nominate an assistant secretary for EM. In the interim, James Owendoff was appointed in June to serve as EM's acting assistant secretary. Shortly after taking the position, Owendoff, who had served as a senior advisor to the EM



Owendoff

assistant secretary since 2010, initiated a 45-day review to identify opportunities to improve the effectiveness and execution of the legacy waste cleanup program. Owendoff said that it was his intention to get the EM team, including site managers and headquarters staff, to address the pressing program decisions that need immediate attention and identify those issues that require further analysis. "It's not a budget drill," he said. "It's not about [getting] more money; \$6.5 billion is a heck of a lot of money."

One such decision, Owendoff said, is whether to grout the underground waste tanks at the Hanford Site, similar to what was done at the Savannah River Site, and what would need to be done to implement

that decision. "I am not making the decision to do that," he said. "I'm just saying [it's] a decision that I believe we need to tee up and look at viable alternatives." He added that any investigation of alternative actions would need to include a cost analysis.

Owendoff said that the review is meant to be a starting point and to serve as a mechanism to energize site managers and DOE staff to take on tough decisions and look at viable alternatives without delaying further action. Subsequently, the department will begin publicizing the key decisions it has identified and engaging with local communities, elected officials, regulators, and other stakeholders to gather their input, he said.

When asked by an audience member what EM is considering, Owendoff stressed that EM does not intend to publish a list of things it intends to accomplish. This was repeated during a later session, where Owendoff said that the review is not meant to create a national list, as the considered decisions will be specific to each site, and final decisions will be made internally. Publishing a formal list would create "all kinds of back and forth, and we would lose focus," he said.

Moving forward on making those decisions and getting things done, however, will require cooperation from everybody,

Owendoff said. As EM's acting assistant secretary, he said that he plans to engage with site managers and DOE staff to help advance cleanup goals, adding that EM has the ability to put in place a sense of urgency among the federal and contractor workforce.

Owendoff also briefly mentioned the use of technology and innovation to accomplish cleanup work, saying that EM will need to take an earnest look at when new technologies are needed and when "brute force" will suffice. Asked by an audience member to clarify his statements on technology, Owendoff said that it is not a "one size fits all" situation. "In my bias for action, I don't want to chase a technology if what we have can get us there," he said.

Ensuring safety

Sean Sullivan, chairman of the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (DNFSB), raised the question of how best to ensure safety at defense cleanup sites and discussed the relationship between safety and accountability. "To ensure safety, we need a strong culture of accountability at defense cleanup sites," he said.

In distinguishing between the cultures of safety and accountability, Sullivan said that a culture of accountability encompasses a broader set of standards. "It is about leadership, doing the right thing, making



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