25-P-0047
August 20, 2025

At a Glance

Audit of the EPA National Center for Radiation Field Operations' Preparedness

Why We Did This Audit

To accomplish this objective:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Inspector General conducted this audit to determine to what extent the EPA National Center for Radiation Field Operations has the capability—including appropriate management and internal control, resources, and staff qualifications—to successfully fulfill its roles and responsibilities in preparing for and responding to radiological incidents. ***Radiological incidents*** refer to radiological emergency responses and nonemergency responses, such as assessments at sites contaminated with radioactive material.

As a component of the EPA's Radiological Emergency Response Team, the National Center for Radiation Field Operations prepares for, plans for, and responds to radiological emergencies nationwide. Specifically, it coordinates field capabilities for preparedness planning, assesses sites contaminated with radioactive material, and conducts on-site monitoring during a radiological incident. The National Center for Radiation Field Operations may also support other agencies since the most significant radiological emergencies rely on federal interagency teams.

To support these EPA mission-related efforts:

- *Improving air quality.*
- *Ensuring the safety of chemicals.*

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List of OIG reports.

What We Found

We found that the National Center for Radiation Field Operations, or NCRFO, needs to take steps to improve its preparedness to respond to radiological emergencies. While the NCRFO successfully conducted nonemergency responses, such as site assessments, we found that it was not fully prepared for the one emergency response it conducted during the period we reviewed. In addition, from October 2017 through January 2024, the EPA regions responded to approximately 90 percent of radiological incidents without participation from the NCRFO, as the regions do not always require the center's specialized experience. This limited participation has led to the center being underutilized by the EPA and impedes NCRFO personnel from gaining valuable field experience. In addition, the NCRFO did not always meet annual exercise expectations, which further limited staff's experience. While the coronavirus pandemic prevented the center's participation in exercises during 2020 and 2021, we found that the center also did not have full participation in other years not affected by the pandemic.

Further, we identified other factors that could hinder the center's preparedness. The NCRFO's succession plans did not adequately identify staff backups, and staff attrition affected the number of staff who had experience with responding to radiological incidents. Additionally, staff did not always meet minimum training requirements for field deployment because of insufficient internal controls, and some mission-critical equipment was not deployable because of the lack of maintenance and limited funds to replace outdated equipment. When considered cumulatively, these factors could hinder the NCRFO's ability to effectively fulfill its roles and responsibilities in preparing for and responding to radiological emergencies.

> **Without adequate experience with exercises, training, and responding to radiological incidents, the NCRFO may lack the skills needed to effectively assist other federal agencies during a radiological emergency.**

Recommendations and Planned Agency Corrective Actions

We recommend that the assistant administrator for Air and Radiation assess the NCRFO to determine the most efficient and effective use of the center's expertise and resources based on the Agency's responsibilities for responding to radiological emergencies and nonemergencies. Depending on the results of that assessment, we recommend that the assistant administrator for Air and Radiation develop a comprehensive strategy to improve the center's preparedness to ensure that it can effectively fulfill its roles and responsibilities in responding to radiological emergencies. This strategy should include a process to ensure that staff participate in an annual exercise, a plan to promote the NCRFO within the EPA, a method to document and track training for all employees, a succession plan, a plan to modernize equipment, a method to track all equipment, and performance measures to ensure that the center is prepared to respond to a radiological emergency. The Agency agreed with our recommendations. However, the planned corrective actions were not complete, and we consider the recommendations unresolved with resolution efforts in progress.