Spending over $6 billion annually on a still-coalescing program taxed the Department's ability to use funds wisely. Senator Johnston characterized the cleanup effort as a "grand and glorious mess." Critical of what he described as the program's failure to make real progress, Johnston stated that there was "no function of government that has been as mismanaged as our waste cleanup." Thomas P. Grumbly, the Clinton Administration's new assistant secretary for environmental management, acknowledged that the program had not achieved enough in terms of concrete results but pointed out that "it's important to understand that everything we do is driven by compliance agreements." Over the past half-dozen years, the Department, the Environmental Protection Agency, and various states had negotiated environmental compliance agreements for all major cleanup sites. Essentially cleanup blueprints, the agreements specified enforceable milestones for each site. The difficulty, as Grumbly noted, was that at many sites the problems were "larger, more complex, or simply different than we had originally expected." Simply put, funding might not be sufficient to fulfill all the agreements. Nor was substantially greater funding likely. The cleanup budget, according to T. J. Glauthier, director of the Office of Management and Budget's natural resources, energy and science division, would remain near fiscal year 1994 levels. Likening cleanup to the video game "Pac Man" because "it can just keep eating away at the budget," Glauthier stated that "we will stabilize [the cleanup budget] at something like this level, while we work on how to manage it better."[269]

Given these budget realities, Grumbly advocated an "action-oriented approach" to cleanup. "Truly urgent risks," ranging from high-level waste tanks at Hanford to worker safety and health issues, required immediate attention. Less urgent risks called for only "interim remedies" to slow or halt migration of contamination until appropriate technology had been developed to deal with the situation. This approach, Grumbly argued, would "avoid the temptation to throw money at problems that do not present any exposure risk merely to appear to be doing something.'" Public participation in decisionmaking was critical to the success of the approach. Both Grumbly and Secretary O'Leary envisioned an open and accessible process in which "stakeholders"—state and local governments, local citizenry, Native Americans, environmentalists, and others—contributed to decisions on cleanup priorities, budgetary allocations, and land use policies. Stakeholder participation was especially critical if compliance agreements had to be renegotiated. Indeed, such negotiations were already underway. In November 1993, the Department, EPA, and the State of Washington, relying on substantive input from stakeholders, reached tentative agreement on a revised Hanford Tri-Party Agreement, first signed in 1989. "We have carved out a new regional consensus about Hanford, and we have changed the political equation in the Northwest," declared Gerald Pollett, executive director of Heart of America Northwest, a local advocacy group. "We are in agreement on a new cleanup approach that no one believed was possible."[270]

Further success, according to Grumbly, depended on "three critical tools": cleanup standards, land use policy, and new technologies. The program's "biggest uncertainty," noted the assistant secretary, was lack of standards for residual radioactivity at cleanup sites. Absence of standards made it impossible to either estimate costs or choose remedies and appropriate technologies. Closely connected was the absence of a land use policy. Without such a policy, cleanup levels could not be established. The implicit assumption that sites would be released for unrestricted use, Grumbly argued, stopped remedial actions in the study phase "because no technology exists to meet unrestricted use standards." Technology was the key, nonetheless, to doing more with a stabilized budget. Grumbly stressed that more incentives would be provided for sites to use innovative technologies, and he singled out the national laboratories' efforts to assist cleanup by developing new technolgies.[271]