

Thirteen workers exposed to radiation at New Mexico nuclear waste site

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Thirteen workers at New Mexico's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), a nuclear waste burial site, were notified on Wednesday that they had inhaled radioactive materials during a leak that occurred on February 14, around 5 a.m. The radioactive material includes plutonium and americium, chemicals that could possibly lead to cancer, and typically remain present in the body after exposure.

Opened in 1999, WIPP is located 26 miles east of Carlsbad, New Mexico, and is the country's first deep underground nuclear repository. It is also the only facility that is capable of storing tools from Los Alamos National Laboratory. Since its opening, it has taken in over 80,000 cubic meters of radioactive material waste—including gloves, tools and other machinery that is contaminated. It employs more than 800 government workers and contractors.

The 13 workers were above ground during the initial leaking, conducting federally mandated oversight. Fortunately, no workers were underground. Tests are currently being run on the workers to determine the level of exposure.

Because the leak occurred deep underground—2,150 feet below the surface, the source has yet to be determined. There has been speculation as to how the leak may have occurred, but due to the contamination investigators would not be able to identify the cause without going underground.

It will be a matter of weeks before investigators are able to even send a probe to examine the cause of the leak, much less be able to send people down to fix the problem.

High-efficiency particulate absorption (HEPA) filtration managed to detect and keep 99.7 percent of the contamination from reaching the surface. Radiation nonetheless spread over the surrounding area, as

monitors as far as half a mile away detected levels of plutonium and americium in the air.

In an attempt to downplay the significance of the incident, officials have repeatedly stated that the levels are “very low” and are not enough to be a public health threat. Officials claim that these levels are less harmful than a dental X-ray, but are, in fact, unable to give reasonable assurances concerning the situation and future repercussions from the underground leak.

The tunnels are divided into eight different shafts; each shaft is in turn divided into six rooms, each room being the size of a football field. The location of the facility was due to the salt deposits that would be able to entomb the containers over time.

While many reports assert that this is the first known accident since the plant has opened, WIPP was shut down only a month ago, on February 5, after a truck hauling salt caught on fire. Six workers were taken for treatment of smoke inhalation. Although apparently unrelated to the contamination leak, this incident nonetheless indicates previous problems at this site.

The leak has halted all incoming waste. Four thousand barrels of toxic waste from the Los Alamos National Laboratory is scheduled to be delivered by the end of June, along with nuclear waste material from labs in Idaho, Illinois and South Carolina.

The recent radiation leak at the New Mexico site is not the only incident that raises serious questions concerning the manner in which nuclear waste is stored.

On Friday, The Associated Press (AP), after obtaining documents, reported that there are “significant construction flaws” in the Hanford nuclear waste complex, located in Washington State. The Hanford Nuclear Power Reservation was constructed during World War II as part of the Manhattan Project

that created the first atomic bomb.

Citing a contractor, the AP report indicates that out of 28 doubled-walled tanks at the Hanford nuclear waste complex, “at least six shared defects with the leaking tank that could lead to future leaks.”

These six doubled-walled tanks, each containing about 5 million gallons of radioactive waste, all contain defects similar to the leak that occurred in October 2012 at the Hanford site. One of the tanks, according to the documents, was found bulging “in the primary and secondary bottoms.” Thirteen other tanks have been found to raise issues; thus, out of the 28 tanks, 20 raise safety concerns.

The Hanford site contains 53 million gallons of high-level radioactive waste made from plutonium for nuclear weapons, and is considered to be the most contaminated site in the Western Hemisphere. The waste is stored in 177 underground tanks, many which have already leaked, potentially threatening the nearby Columbia River.

The Hanford nuclear site has been surrounded with controversy. Whistleblower Donna Busche, the manager of Environmental and Nuclear Safety at the site, was fired in February for raising technical issues about the cleanup. Before then, another whistleblower, Walter Tamosaitis, was fired in October, after publicly discussing the dangers at the facility last year. The fact that two people have been fired in recent months raises troubling questions concerning the government’s capacity to safely deal with the nuclear waste it has created to make atomic weapons.



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