

Search crew finds location but not source of leak at New Mexico nuclear waste storage site

D. Lencho
21 April 2014

On April 16, more than two months after an underground air monitor detected airborne radiation underground at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) nuclear waste burial site in Carlsbad, New Mexico (see “Thirteen workers exposed to radiation in New Mexico nuclear waste site”), a search team clad in heavy protective gear discovered the location of the contamination.

Since moving in the heavy-duty suits is slow and laborious, and the team’s respiratory equipment was running low, the team turned back before pinpointing the exact source of the leak, determining only that it is in a storage unit known as panel seven. This means that more trips to the 2,150-foot-deep panel will be required to find the source and to deal with it.

On the night of February 14, the monitor set off an alert, causing evacuation of the area and a halt to deliveries. Since then, the number of WIPP workers found to be contaminated with radiation has risen from 13 to 21. In addition, increased radiation has been detected in surrounding areas above ground.

The leak followed on the heels of an incident on February 5 in which a salt-hauling truck caught fire underground. 86 workers had to be evacuated. Six were hospitalized for smoke inhalation and seven others were treated on site.

A March 14 DOE (Department of Energy) Office of Environment Management report on the fire “identifies shortcomings in the preventive maintenance program, emergency management, and emergency response training and drills by the Nuclear Waste Partnership LLC managing and operating DOE Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) near Carlsbad, N.M., and it also faults the oversight provided by DOE’s Carlsbad Field Office,” according to an ohsonline.com article.

The article adds that the report “finds the

NWP/Carlsbad Field Office emergency management program is not fully compliant with DOE’s requirements for a comprehensive emergency management system. While the report identified the direct cause of the incident...the investigative board identified 21 error precursors on the date of the fire. The truck operator’s training and qualification were inadequate to ensure proper response to a vehicle fire, and he did not initially notify the Central Monitoring Room that there was a fire or describe the fire’s location.”

Joe Franco, DOE’s Carlsbad Field Office manager, claimed, “We take these findings seriously and, in fact, we are already implementing many of the corrective actions in the report.”

However, criticism of WIPP from outside the DOE—from scientific, community and environmental organizations—has been constant since planning for the project began decades ago.

WIPP’s history traces its roots to the emergence of the US as a nuclear power during and after World War II. As the development of nuclear weapons picked up its pace, the problem of the accumulation of so-called transuranic waste, or TRU, developed along with it. TRU contains the elements americium and plutonium—which has a half-life in the tens of thousands of years—and contact with or ingestion of it, although it is categorized as “low-level,” is carcinogenic in minute amounts.

The Department of Energy began a search for a location to dispose of TRU, and after other proposed sites were rejected, decided in the early 1970s to begin testing on an area known as the Delaware Basin in southeastern New Mexico, about 26 miles east of the town of Carlsbad. A salt basin formed about 250 million years ago, and below some 300 meters (1,000

feet) of soil and rock, it was promoted by government officials and some scientists as an ideal waste disposal spot.

Other scientists voiced concerns, among them the possibility of brine seepage and doubts about the basin's stability. To counteract criticisms—and growing public unrest—DOE formed the Environmental Evaluation Group (EEG), as an ostensibly objective investigative and consultative agency.

Nonetheless, fears of the possibility of a serious disaster and skepticism about government reassurances spawned a number of organizations that oppose WIPP or are highly critical of its standards and procedures.

Congress authorized construction of WIPP in 1979 with testing due to begin in 1988, but opposition delayed it into the early 1990s. At the urging of New Mexico Senators, Republican Pete Domenici and Democrat Jeff Bingaman, Congress overrode opposition and passed a bill to open the facility in October 1992.

The estimated cost of WIPP is expected to reach at least \$19 billion by the time it is filled and sealed.

The accident report for the February 14 radiation leak has not yet been released, but various organizations such as the Southwest Research and Information Center (SRIC) and Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety (CCNS) are calling for an independent inquiry.

In a March 5 article on [lajicarita.org](http://lajicarita.wordpress.com/2014/03/05/whats-wrong-with-wipp/) (<http://lajicarita.wordpress.com/2014/03/05/whats-wrong-with-wipp/>), SRIC's director of the Nuclear Waste Safety program, Don Hancock, took the DOE and the Nuclear Waste Partnership, the operating contractor, to task for their repeated “start clean, stay clean” claims, and listed a host of unknowns regarding the incident, including the cause of the leak, the amount of radiation leaked into both the underground salt mine and the environment, the amount of exposure for workers and its health effects, decontamination needed, and “If WIPP reopens, what changes in the operation, monitoring, and safety culture will be implemented?”

Hancock also condemned plans to expand WIPP, and some proposed modifications to the permit process to facilitate the expansion. He urged readers to strongly oppose the proposals.

On CCNS's web site, readers are encouraged to contact the governor, Susana Martinez, and their elected representatives to make that demand. In June

2012, Martinez, as keynote speaker at a celebration of the one thousandth shipment of transuranic waste to WIPP, congratulated the Los Alamos National Laboratory for reaching a “significant milestone of cleanup of defense-generated nuclear waste here in New Mexico.”

“I am pleased to see the progress that has been made,” said Martinez, citing the record number of waste shipments that had been transported to WIPP that year.

While the concerns expressed by scientists and community organizations are unquestionably valid, they raise crucial political issues. The waste that really needs disposal is the outmoded capitalist system and its most devastating byproduct, war. Problems associated with the production of nuclear weapons and disposal of its byproducts cannot be addressed by appeals to capitalism's political operatives. The working class must unite across national boundaries to put an end to capitalism, whose archaic nation-state system leads inexorably to imperialist war and its many toxic side effects.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact