

Energy Department report calls New Mexico radiation leak “preventable”

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The release of radioactive waste that exposed 21 workers to radiation at a storage facility in New Mexico earlier this year was “preventable,” according to a report issued by the US Department of Energy.

The report cites the private contractor that operates the plant for a long list of safety shortfalls including a lack of accident training that caused delays of up to 10 hours before action was taken. The report noted that site workers said they were afraid to bring safety concerns to the attention of supervisors because they feared retaliation.

On February 14, an underground leak at New Mexico’s Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), a nuclear waste burial site, exposed above-ground workers to plutonium and americium. Prior to the incident, the site had functioned for the past 15 years as a permanent repository for low-level radioactive waste left over from the research and production of nuclear weapons.

Among many other problems cited by the report, investigators found that the air filter system put in place to prevent a leak from reaching the surface was poorly designed and long overdue for replacement. A radiation monitor near the leak was also found to be in a state of disrepair.

The investigation board noted that at the time of the leak, many aspects of the plant’s operations did not meet federal standards for operation of a nuclear facility. They also concluded that “a thorough and conservatively considered hazard analysis, coupled with a robust, tested and well maintained HEPA filter...ventilation system could have prevented the unfiltered above ground release....”

The report also concluded that the plant had no effective maintenance program for critical equipment and components, as well as inadequate training for control technicians and other personnel.

The facility had a “safety culture” causing a “lack of a questioning attitude, reluctance to bring up and document issues, and acceptance and normalization of degraded equipment and conditions.”

Based upon the conclusions of the accident investigation the report concluded that “the unfiltered above-ground release...was preventable.”

The report found that workers at the facility were reluctant to identify safety problems to management for fear of retaliation. “During interviews, many employees indicated a reluctance to use the WIPP Form process due to a fear of retribution,” according to the report. “The most prevalent example of retribution identified by employees was the assignment of undesirable tasks for a couple of weeks after submitting a WIPP Form.”

Don Hancock, head of the Nuclear Waste Safety Program at the nonprofit Southwest Research and Information Center in Albuquerque, commented, “Why are we paying the contractor \$80 million a year to have ineffective radiation protection, maintenance and safety programs?”

In light of those shortcomings, Hancock asked, “Why should we believe that...the DOE and the contractor are going to be able to fix these things?”

Several theories have been advanced regarding the source of the leak, the most recent by New Mexico environment secretary Ryan Flynn before a legislative panel June 10. Flynn told the panel that scientists had identified five out of six potentially explosive containers of waste from Los Alamos National Laboratory that are being stored at a site in west Texas. The sixth container is being stored at WIPP. The *Las Cruces Sun-News* reported that Flynn “estimated it would be months before a definitive cause is determined.”

Nonetheless, New Mexico politicians, as well as the

DOE and the Nuclear Waste Partnership, WIPP's contracted operators, have been pushing to reopen the facility.

According to the *Albuquerque Journal*, the budget approved by the House Energy and Development Subcommittee "allows the National Nuclear Security Administration to divert \$120 million from NNSA's pension fund to offset the looming WIPP expenditures."

The state of New Mexico hosts many aspects of the military-industrial-research complex including three Air Force bases, a missile-testing range in White Sands, and an army proving ground and maneuver range.

Other war-related federal installations include Los Alamos National Laboratory, which maintains a large portion of the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile, and Sandia National Laboratories, which conducts electronic and industrial research on Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque.



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