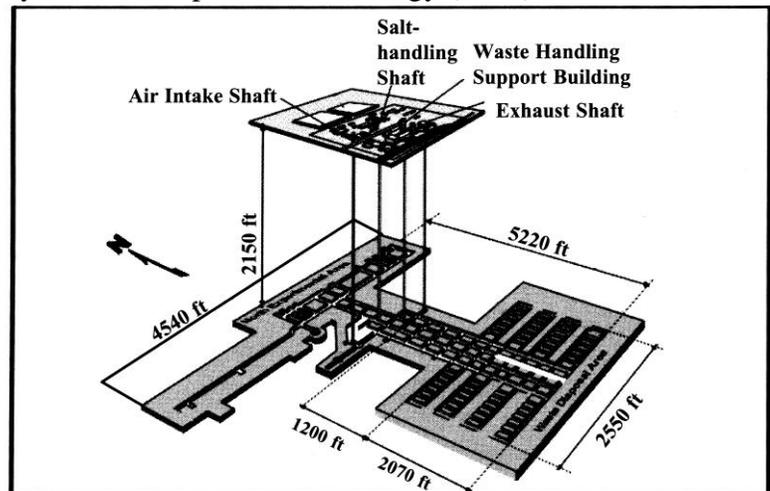


## STATUS OF THE WASTE ISOLATION PILOT PLANT (WIPP) The only U.S. geologic repository for nuclear waste

### WHAT IS WIPP?

WIPP is located in southeastern New Mexico, 26 miles east of Carlsbad, and is designated by federal law **only for disposal of transuranic (TRU-plutonium contaminated) waste from nuclear weapons production**. The underground tunnels are 2,150 feet below the surface in a bedded salt formation. WIPP is operated by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and its contractor, Nuclear Waste Partnership (a consortium of URS Energy and Construction and Babcock and Wilcox Technical Services Group, with AREVA Federal Services as a major subcontractor). The first waste shipment arrived on March 26, 1999, and by February 5, 2014, the site had received 11,894 shipments with 171,064 waste containers and 91,265 cubic meters of TRU waste from 12 DOE sites. Since February 2014 the site has been shut down.



### WHAT HAPPENED ON VALENTINE'S DAY, 2014?

At approximately 11:14 pm, the only operating underground air monitor detected a radiation release. No one was underground, but 11 workers were on the surface and two more arrived soon afterwards. Approximately 135 more workers came on Saturday morning, February 15. In press releases that day and Sunday, DOE repeatedly said, "No contamination has been found on any equipment, personnel, or facilities." However, on Wednesday, February 19, the Carlsbad Environmental Monitoring and Research Center (CEMRC) reported that radioactive contamination from WIPP waste was detected 0.6 miles from the exhaust shaft where underground air is released. During the next six weeks, **22 workers were confirmed to have received internal radiation contamination of americium-241 and plutonium-239.**

### WHAT CAUSED THE RADIATION LEAK?

**No one knows. The amount of the release also is unknown.** On May 15, 2014, pictures in Panel 7, Room 7 showed a 55-gallon drum (LA00000068660) that had come from Los Alamos National Lab was breached with the lid unsealed. A DOE Accident Investigation Board is scheduled to release a report regarding suspected cause(s) in March 2015.

### WHAT ARE THE PLANS FOR WIPP?

**DOE intends to reopen WIPP, but not as the "start clean, stay clean" facility with no releases of radioactive or toxic chemicals that it was designed to be.** Because thousands of feet of underground tunnels cannot be completely decontaminated, DOE's Recovery Plan, released on September 30, 2014, states that the re-opened site would have contaminated and uncontaminated areas. A new exhaust shaft, underground tunnels, and ventilation system would be constructed to be "clean." DOE plans to re-start limited operations in the contaminated area by April 2016, with the new construction happening later, so that the site might be in full operation by 2018. By September 30, 2016, DOE's plan includes spending more than \$730 million since the radiation release, and more than \$550 million more could be required for the new construction.

## **DO REGULATORS HAVE TO APPROVE THE RE-OPENING?**

**Yes.** The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) issues the operating permit and has stated repeatedly that WIPP cannot re-open until NMED approves – and DOE resolves permit violations at WIPP and other sites. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) also could exercise authority to require changes before WIPP re-opens.

The DOE Recovery Plan states that some modifications in the WIPP Permit will be required, but the specific changes and schedule for the requests are not public. At least some of the permit modifications will require public comment and public hearings, which take months or years to complete and may or may not be approved. Any NMED decisions about permit modifications can be challenged in New Mexico courts.

## **WHAT HAPPENS TO WASTE AT OTHER SITES?**

**Sites must store their TRU waste.** DOE's latest Inventory Report states that with current stored waste and additional waste, there is more than 65,000 cubic meters (m<sup>3</sup>) of TRU waste still to come to WIPP, including: Idaho National Lab – 24,308 m<sup>3</sup>; Hanford (WA) – 22,660 m<sup>3</sup>; Savannah River (SC) – 8,364 m<sup>3</sup>; Los Alamos (NM) – 6,599 m<sup>3</sup>; Oak Ridge (TN) – 1,582 m<sup>3</sup>; and other sites. WIPP's capacity in unfilled Panels 7 and 8 is less than 35,000 m<sup>3</sup>. What would be done with additional wastes is unknown.

## **WHAT DOES CONGRESS HAVE TO DO?**

Each year Congress must provide funds for WIPP. The Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 WIPP budget was \$221 million. FY 2015 budget is \$324 million. The proposed FY 2016 budget is \$248 million.

## **WHAT CAN PEOPLE DO?**

- Request that DOE and its contractors provide accurate and timely information about WIPP and the waste at other sites.
- New Mexicans will participate in proceedings regarding changes to the WIPP permit.
- People in states with other sites can be involved in regulatory proceedings.
- People anywhere can contact their representative and senators regarding WIPP funding, funding needs for other sites, the need to understand what caused the WIPP release and how future events could be prevented.

## **SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

The DOE WIPP Recovery website: <http://www.wipp.energy.gov/WIPPRcovery/Recovery.html>

The NMED website with background and current information about the release:  
<http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/NMED/Issues/WIPP2014.html>

The EPA WIPP website: <http://www.epa.gov/radiation/wipp/index.html>

The Southwest Research and Information Center (SRIC) website: <http://www.sric.org>

The Snake River Alliance website: <http://www.snakeriveralliancc.org>

The Savannah River Site (SRS) Watch website: <http://www.srswatch.org>