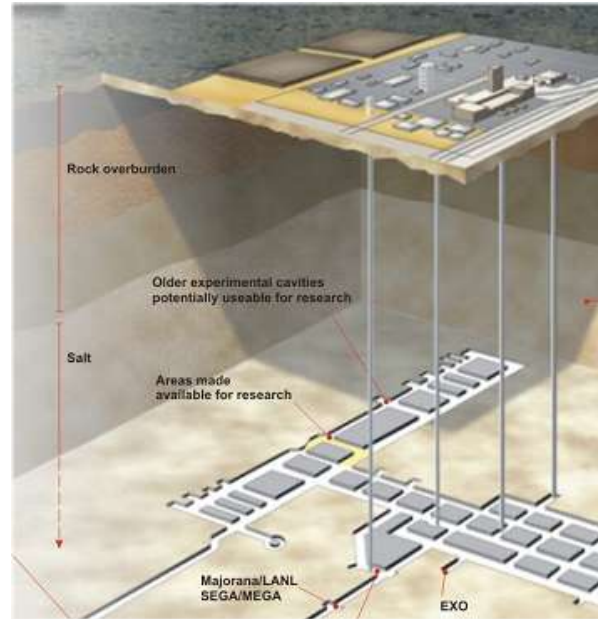


Only US Nuclear Weapons Waste Storage Site Still Closed and Hot

By William Boardman, Reader Supported News 22 April 14



Nobody's ever tried to fix an underground radiation accident before More than two months after Plutonium and Americium leaked from the supposedly leak-proof underground nuclear weapons waste storage facility in Carlsbad, New Mexico, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) still does not know what caused the leak almost half a mile underground, but [on April 17](#), an exploration crew found increasing radiation levels before retreating to safety. DOE plans to send more teams, [or robots](#), into the storage area to find the source of the radioactive contamination.

The nuclear weapons waste facility, carved into an underground salt deposit, is known as the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, or WIPP. It is the only repository for U.S. nuclear weapons waste and has been closed since undetermined amounts of Plutonium and Americium leaked [into the atmosphere](#) on February 14, 2014. This was the first known radioactive leak from WIPP, which its planners said would contain the nuclear weapons waste for 10,000 years without leaking.

As has been true at WIPP for months now, reliable, detailed information has been scarce. U.S. officials didn't even inform the public that there had been a leak until four days after the event. Currently, the government is not saying what levels of radiation their teams have encountered during four trips into the storage area 2,130 feet underground. An [Associated Press](#) report carried this typically opaque bit of public information on April 17: "Tammy Reynolds, the U.S. Department of Energy's deputy recovery manager, told a community meeting in Carlsbad that more trips need to be made into the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant to further investigate the accident, but officials hope to have more information next week."

Underground storage area equals almost one square mile

According to the Department of Energy, there are seven sections or “panels” in the salt mine where the nuclear weapons waste is stored. Five of these sections have been sealed and are supposed to remain sealed for at least 10,000 years. Panel 6 is reportedly full, but not yet sealed, with no explanation for that delay. Panel 7 is an active storage area that has not been filled, and is the apparent location of radioactivity from whatever sort of accident has taken place.

“It doesn’t seem to us that the contamination came from Panel 6, that the source came from Panel 7,” Tammy Reynolds said.

[She also said](#)

: “The more they went into panel 7, the more it [radiation] started becoming more widespread.... They were picking up contamination more frequent.”

Three weeks earlier, the Southwest Research and Information Center (SRIC) reported the same information more precisely,

[on March 28](#)

: “Apparently, one or more of the 258 contact-handled (CH) waste containers underground in Room 7 and Panel 7 released radioactive and toxic chemicals.” This report calculates that the distance from the presumed point of release to the point of detection above ground is a mile and a half or more and that the radioactive release lasted more than 15 hours, based on DOE documents.

In his sixth open letter of reassurance to area residents, the Energy Department field manager offered no more specific information than any other public information officer. Jose Franco’s

[April 18 letter](#)

said of the investigation underground: “As workers traveled toward the waste disposal area, they did not detect airborne contamination. This confirms our ventilation system is working as designed. Once the location and cause of the event are identified, we can focus on any necessary cleanup activities in the area and work towards returning WIPP to full waste disposal operations.”

Government says irradiated workers are just fine

Officially, the radioactive release of February 14 contaminated 21 WIPP workers. These workers, who are employed by the government contractor that manages WIPP, ingested small amounts of Plutonium or Americium, either of which will remain a threat to the workers’ health

for a long time (Plutonium 239 has a half-life of 24,000 years; Americium 242 has a half-life of 141 years).

Officially, the workers' "

[exposure levels](#)

were extremely low, and the employees are unlikely to experience any health effects as a result." Unlikely, perhaps, but with highly radioactive alpha radiation emitters lodged in their bodies, their chance of serious health issues has increased, and will not likely decrease. The workers were all working above ground when they were exposed. Reportedly there were no workers underground at the time of the accident.

The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant currently has more than

[5,000 cubic](#)

feet of nuclear weapons waste in 41 packages that are not isolated. They are stored above ground in a parking area unit and a waste handling building. This waste arrived prior to the accidents at WIPP and the accidents prevented the waste from being moved underground.

Other waste shipments headed for WIPP have been diverted to a waste control facility in Andrews, Texas, where they are stored above ground. Under the current agreement with the Energy Department, that facility is allowed to store the waste for a year, with extensions for more years possible.

In its most recent "WIPP Radiation Release" update

[on April 10](#)

, the Southwest Research and Information Center provides a list of some of the things that remain unknown about radiation releases at WIPP since February 14:

- What caused the release.
- What was the nature of the release that allowed some contaminants to travel more than a mile and a half.
- What contaminants were released into the environment before the HEPA filtration system was triggered.
- What contaminants in what amounts have been captured by the HEPA filters.

- Whether the amount of the release and the location of all of the containments can be determined.
- When radiation levels in the WIPP underground air will return to pre-release levels.
- The amounts of contamination in the WIPP underground.
- What underground decontamination will be done.
- What amount of exposure to radiation and toxic chemicals workers going underground will receive or have received.
- What amount of exposure that workers on the surface have received or will receive.
- What surface decontamination will be done.
- What changes in the WIPP operation, monitoring, and safety culture will be implemented.

[The government](#) , on the other hand. continues to advise anyone who will listen that “print and electronic media and ‘watchdog groups’ have made this nuclear radiation molehill into a mountain. One millirem – mrem – is a radiation dose that is approximately equivalent to what one would receive from eating 100 bananas (not necessary to eat them all at once).”

In other words, even if you’re a heavy

[banana-eater](#)

: Don’t worry, be happy.

[NOTE:

a detailed account of government response to the accidents at the Waste Isolation Pilot Project, titled “US Nuclear Waste Dirty-Bombs New Mexico With Plutonium,” is

[available here](#)

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