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Frequently Asked Questions

What caused the fire and the radiation release events?

The federal accident investigation board who reviewed the underground salt haul truck fire at WIPP attributed the cause of the fire to buildup of combustible fluids on the truck that came into contact with hot surfaces. The report can be found at http://www.wipp.energy.gov/Special/AIB Report.pdf.

The accident investigation board's initial investigation into the February 14 radiological event focused on the reaction to the radioactive material release, including related exposure to above-ground workers and the response actions. The report can be found at http://www.wipp.energy.gov/Special/AIB_Final_WIPP_Rad_Release_Phase1_04_22_2014.pdf.

After the source of the radiological event is determined, the accident investigation board will release a supplemental report focused on the direct cause of the release and worker protection measures in the underground facility.

The report stated the direct cause of the release was the breach of at least one transuranic waste container in the underground facility which resulted in airborne radioactivity escaping to the environment downstream of the high-efficiency particulate air filters. The Board identified the root cause to be a failure to fully understand, characterize, and control the radiological hazard among management at WIPP, the operating contractor, and the Carlsbad Field Office.

What is being done to prevent a reoccurrence of these events?

As the result of these events, the WIPP repository is not accepting any waste shipments at this time. WIPP is developing a recovery plan, one of many steps and processes that need to be completed before the facility can safely return to full operations. The accident investigation board reports identified a number of judgments of need, and the Department is currently developing formal corrective action plans. WIPP, with the assistance of

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nuclear experts from around the country, is identifying all hazards associated with operations and implementing controls to prevent the recurrence of recent events.

How long will WIPP be closed to waste shipments? When will WIPP reopen?

Until the source of the February 14 event is isolated and mitigated, it is premature to say when shipments can resume. WIPP will reopen only when it is safe to do so. The Department is committed to planning and implementing the required recovery actions and corrective actions to enable a resumption of operations as quickly as can safely be achieved. Site safety basis documents, which require us to identify and mitigate all hazards associated with WIPP operations, also are being evaluated and revised.

Was anyone injured or harmed by either of these events?

Six WIPP personnel were evaluated for smoke inhalation and released from a local hospital the day of the underground fire. One employee continues to be treated for smoke inhalation as a result of the fire.

There were no injuries related to the February 14 radiological release from WIPP. Bioassay tests showed that 22 workers received internal contamination as a result of the release, with a total exposure less than 10 millirem each, which is equivalent to the exposure you would expect from a chest x-ray. All follow-up tests were below minimum detectable concentrations. No long-term adverse health effects are expected for these employees.

Are WIPP employees still working while the repository is closed, and if so, what are they doing?

WIPP crews who normally work in the underground facility are performing surface facilities maintenance or assisting with procedure reviews and revisions, retraining and recovery activities. On return to work in the underground facility, their priorities will be maintenance of equipment and ground control systems. The WIPP crew is also involved in the entries into the underground facility to determine the root cause of the event and evaluate mine conditions. WIPP's skilled workforce is critical to recovery activities and resumption of disposal operations.

What is taking DOE so long to determine the cause of the radiological release event?

WIPP is committed to protecting personnel while they are in the underground facility collecting and analyzing evidence, which requires a careful, methodical approach. Panel 7 presented an unknown and contaminated environment for recovery teams. Entering the area for investigative purposes requires a detailed plan that describes the work scope, how the work is to be performed, and the equipment that will be used. Recovery teams perform mock-ups to demonstrate proficiency and safety. Air respirators also limit the team's time underground. Photographs and samples taken during entries must also be analyzed to plan subsequent entries.

How much will it cost DOE to recover from these two events?

It is premature to estimate the total cost for recovery and restart of disposal operations at WIPP until DOE determines the source of the radiological release and completes detailed planning.

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New environmental sampling results available

New environmental sampling data for air, water and wildlife is available at: http://www.wipp.energy.gov/wipprecovery/sampling_results.html.

Community Meetings Scheduled

May 22 – The City of Carlsbad and DOE will co-host its weekly meeting featuring updates on WIPP recovery activities. The meeting is scheduled at 5:30 p.m. Location: Carlsbad City Council Chambers, 101 N. Halagueno Street. Live streaming of the weekly meetings can be seen at http://new.livestream.com/rrv/.