

Update 3/18/04 | Shipments expected for the week 3/21/04 through 3/27/04: Hanford (2), INEEL (3), RFETS (11), SRS

TRU TeamWorks

March 18, 2004

A weekly e-newsletter for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant team

The Big Story WIPP personnel overcome evacuation order

At 9:30 a.m. on Thursday, March 11, a natural gas blowout occurred during drilling operations at a gas well site in Carlsbad. The blowout site is located just across the street from the Skeen-Whitlock Building in Carlsbad and next door to the Sandia National Laboratories Carlsbad Programs Group (SNL-CPG) offices. Though the WIPP site itself is 30 miles away, WIPP support services were directly affected.

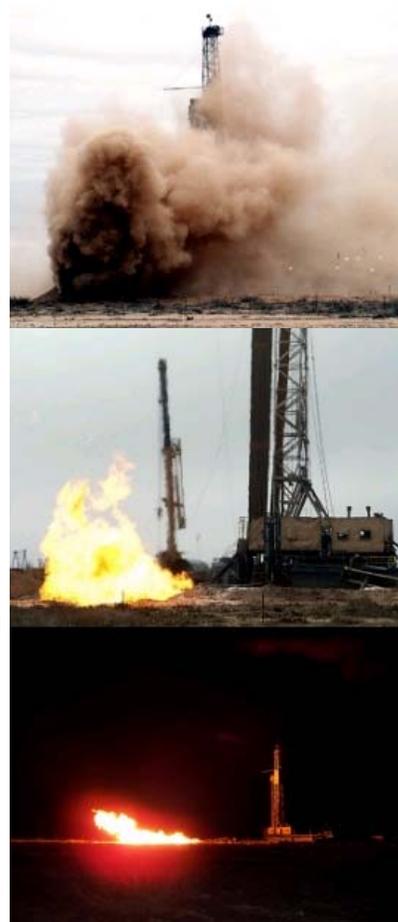
As natural gases spewed into the air, Carlsbad and Eddy County law and fire officials evacuated all citizens within a one-mile radius of the rig site. The evacuation order shut down the Skeen-Whitlock Building and SNL-CPG offices, but didn't stop dedicated WIPP employees from performing essential duties. Some employees went to alternate office locations or worked from home to overcome the obstacles imposed by the evacuation.

WIPP personnel were also ready to lend a hand in dealing with the crisis. City emergency response personnel requested assistance from WTS Communication staff in disseminating information to local and state media. WIPP Communication personnel prepared an initial press release for the incident command center on Thursday and remained voluntarily on-call throughout the weekend.

Paul Detwiler, CBFO acting manager; members of the WTS legal staff; WRES and other employees temporarily relocated to other WIPP office buildings on Main and Mermod streets and continued to work throughout Thursday and Friday.

"Our primary concern was the safety of our personnel and others in the area," notes Detwiler. "The evacuation order was immediately carried out, which left little time to determine alternate courses of action. However, dedicated WIPP personnel worked to ensure that important work continued during these difficult circumstances."

This issue of *TRU TeamWorks* focuses on the impacts of the evacuation to WIPP operations. It is noteworthy that all essential WIPP functions were performed effectively in spite of the unexpected – and continuing – loss of office space at Sandia's Carlsbad Office.



Top: The gas rig blowout
Middle: Burning off gas began on Saturday
Bottom: Lighting up the night sky

Video: Click [here](#) to see a brief video of the fire. File size is about 3 MB.



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WIPP Shipments
(as of 03/18/04
at 8:23 a.m.)

Shipments
scheduled to
arrive at WIPP
3/21/04 - 3/27/04
22

Total shipments
received at WIPP
2,411

Total volume
disposed at WIPP
18,669 m³

FY04 Performance
Metrics

In the news



CCP and CTAC



Planning pays off



Time permitting



The air up there



SNL-CPG still out

Under control



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The evacuation of the Skeen-Whitlock Building was an unexpected interruption for all project employees. Though everyone was swift to obey the order, many employees did manage to gather some of the items necessary to perform their jobs in alternate locations.

Central Characterization Project (CCP)

CCP is headquartered in the Skeen-Whitlock Building. Though these employees were now "out-of-pocket," CCP operations around the country continued to operate normally. However, satellite CCP operations at the Savannah River Site, Nevada Test Site, Hanford and the Lawrence Livermore and Los Alamos national laboratories depend on daily support from CCP "hub" employees.



So how did Carlsbad CCP personnel continue to support their site teams? David Haar, CCP manager, explains, "CCP team members took individual initiative to make alternate arrangements in the midst of the evacuation order." Here are a few examples:

- ◆ The CCP management team found alternate office space in the WTS office building on Mermod and Main streets. From this location, the team was able to coordinate cross-country communications. Other displaced CCP employees participated in conference calls from home or with personal cell phones.
- ◆ CCP waste certification officials (WCO) grabbed files awaiting review before they exited the building. WCOs must certify waste data packages before the waste can be readied for shipment to WIPP. Failure to have completed these certifications last week would have impacted waste shipments from SRS. "The completion of those data reviews was critical to our ability to meet the six-shipment-per-week goal from SRS," notes Haar.
- ◆ The L&M Technologies team arranged to access their computer files from an alternate L&M office. L&M provides procedure maintenance and records support to CCP.

"I am very proud of the way the team responded in this situation," concludes Haar. "Of course, safety was the first priority, but our team also reacted in ways that allowed us to continue our duties once we were out of danger. We understood that our support was important to our colleagues across the nation, and I think the level of personal commitment shown by these individuals is very impressive."

CTAC

The CBFO Technical Assistance Contractor (CTAC) is also headquartered in the Skeen-Whitlock Building. Vernon Daub, CTAC manager, recalls the blowout, "We all heard the blowout and one of our employees saw it happen. It was clear that gas was venting to the atmosphere and we all became concerned."



CTAC personnel evacuated, but according to Daub, the impact to their operations was minimal. "We basically lost one day of operation on Thursday, because Friday was a scheduled day off for many of our staff members. Also, CTAC maintains offices at the WIPP site itself, so we were able to support the WIPP mission from that location."

Daub notes that the incident would undoubtedly result in lessons learned for many WIPP organizations. "Our main concern was ensuring our team members were safe as they evacuated the building. A second concern was our ability to operate if the evacuation order remained in effect for a prolonged period of time. Fortunately, we were able to return to our offices on Monday."

Like everyone affected by the blowout, Daub is grateful that no one was injured. "CTAC's inconvenience in this situation was minor when compared to that of the families displaced from their homes for several days. On a positive note, the experience has left everyone with an opportunity to prepare for unexpected circumstances such as this in the future."

Business as usual**Topics**

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The morning of March 11 started out just like any other day at the Skeen-Whitlock Building. Then at approximately 9:30 a.m. things changed – a gas rig just across the street from the building blew out. The building and surrounding areas were evacuated. While many WIPP employees took advantage of an unexpected day off, WIPP Waste Information System (WWIS) personnel simply changed locations and kept working.

The WWIS, vital to the TRU waste disposal process, has contingency plans to address a variety of possible failures and scenarios. One of those contingencies is evacuation of the Skeen-Whitlock Building.

"This scenario (the building evacuation) is addressed in our plan and because of that we were able to conduct business as usual," said Dave Speed, WWIS team lead. WWIS personnel have remote access capabilities that allow them to access the system from alternate locations. Using a secure connection, Speed and Randy Chatfield performed WWIS functions from their homes, enabling them to review and approve the first scheduled shipment from Idaho's Advanced Mixed Waste Treatment Facility on Friday with no schedule impact.



The WWIS system performs two main functions. First, it is used to check waste data against regulatory standards to ensure that all TRU waste shipped to and received at WIPP meets disposal and transportation requirements. Second, it serves as a recordkeeping database, tracking and recording every shipment from the time it leaves a generator site to the time the payload is emplaced in the WIPP underground. The WWIS database is the only mission-critical system at WIPP. Without it, shipments could come to a standstill.

Time permitting

To date, the CBFO and WRES permitting and compliance team has submitted 28 requests to the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) to modify WIPP's state-issued hazardous waste facility permit.

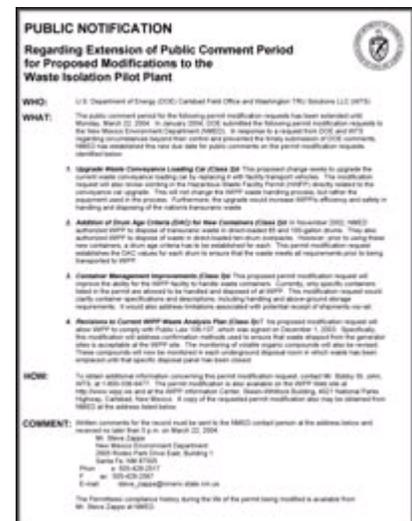
However, last week's evacuation of the Skeen-Whitlock Building threw a wrench into what is routinely a smooth process. In January, four key modifications were submitted within three days of each other:

- Upgrade Waste Conveyance Loading Car
- Addition of Drum Age Criteria (DAC) for New Containers
- Container Management Improvements
- Revisions to Current WIPP Waste Analysis Plan

The problem arose Thursday when WIPP permitting personnel were forced to evacuate the Skeen-Whitlock Building – leaving behind files with CBFO and WTS official comments that were due to NMED the following day. Friday marked the last day of the 60-day public comment period on three of four modification proposals.

As part of the permit modification process, CBFO and WTS typically submit comments to NMED in response to written stakeholder concerns or issues aired by stakeholders in public meetings. Public meetings had been held in Carlsbad and Santa Fe in February. NMED formulates its decisions about permit changes based on stakeholder, CBFO and WTS comments and its own review of compliance standards as they relate to the modification request. Comments received after the deadline cannot be considered in the decision-making process.

With the deadline looming, CBFO and WRES permitting specialists called the regulator to request an extension of the comment period until March 22. Deviations from the mandated 60-day public comment period require regulator approval and notification to the public.



"We had good cooperation with the regulator on this request," said Dave Streng, WRES senior permitting engineer. "Steve Zappe worked closely with our team to process this request." Communicating via e-mail and telephone from locations around the state, permit team members drafted a public notice, while Zappe, NMED Hazardous Waste Bureau WIPP permit manager, worked late to assist from his Santa Fe office.

NMED did approve the extended comment period, and state newspapers carried the public notice on Tuesday – a fine example of true teamwork.



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It's all about the (air) quality



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Following Thursday's rig blowout, WTS Industrial Hygiene Monitoring has been sampling the air at the Skeen-Whitlock Building.

Sampling was performed throughout the building Sunday night to ensure that air quality was safe for people returning to work on Monday. The building's air was again sampled Monday morning. Industrial Hygiene personnel are monitoring the air for volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and methane. At present, both VOC and methane levels have tested at background levels, posing no health risk to employees who work in the building.

An air quality reading taken outside the Skeen-Whitlock building

The monitoring group is also testing for noise levels inside the building, which they say are acceptable. Noise outside the building from the release of the pressurized gas is considerable, but according to monitoring personnel, should not be a concern unless exposure is prolonged.

Further monitoring will be performed as-needed, based on activities occurring at the drill rig.

"We have been watching the situation carefully since Thursday and will continue to watch it until everything is under control," says John Doherty, WTS industrial hygienist. "The safety of all employees is priority-one, but under the circumstances we are paying extremely close attention to the safety and welfare of the employees working at the Skeen-Whitlock Building."

Anyone with questions or concerns is encouraged to contact John Doherty at 234-8693.



John Doherty, WTS Industrial Hygienist, checks the air quality outside the Skeen-Whitlock Building. The blowout site is visible in the background.

SNL copes - scientifically - with evacuation



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WIPP e-mail must go through

Paul DeVito, WIPP Information Systems Security Manager, worked Thursday and Friday clearing the WIPPnet e-mail scanner and delivering all safe e-mail. DeVito used remote access to the WIPP server from his home. "When we had no access to the building, the alternate access procedure really paid off," DeVito says.

Brandon Storment of NCI's technical staff worked Thursday night on remote access to move e-mail from WIPP servers. He was also busy on Friday, troubleshooting off-site log-in difficulties for CBFO and WTS staff at the Outplacement Center on Main Street.

Mid-morning Tuesday, March 16 -- Paul Shoemaker, Sandia National Laboratories Carlsbad Programs Group (SNL-CPG) manager, stands huddled like a coach at the center of a 14-member retrieval team with a mission. From the parking lot next door to SNL's evacuated National Parks Highway building, the recovery team awaits technicians' okay to re-enter to retrieve essential equipment.

"We've been as productive as possible while we remain out of the facility," explains Shoemaker -- ear protection in hand -- next door to the roaring gas well blowout. For days, the staff has worked from their homes or alternate locations.

By conducting daily all-hands telephone conferences, Shoemaker kept employees informed. An all-hands meeting was scheduled immediately following the retrieval operation. SNL could re-open its building as early as Friday or by Monday, if plans go as expected, says Shoemaker.



Paul Shoemaker, manager of SNL-CPG (center) meets with the SNL equipment retrieval team. Greg Sahn, CBFO Security manager (red shirt) and Les Shepard, SNL vice-president (right) assist.

Shoemaker activated the SNL-Albuquerque Emergency Operations Center last Saturday night when he and Ron Parsons, SNL facility security officer, determined that re-entry would not be possible while the gas well burned.

The team devised logistics to enable SNL to continue work on project deliverables, including WIPP's Compliance Recertification Application, performance assessments and negotiation with EPA on super-compacted waste.

Noon Tuesday, March 16 -- The SNL team heads into the building, led by an incident commander with two industrial hygienists and a geotechnical specialist. Meanwhile, a geothermal consultant gathered information from the fire department at the well site. As Shoemaker projected, recovery of essential equipment was completed in less than two hours:

- ◆ Geo-hydrology field equipment and instrument trailer
- ◆ Computers, hard drives and tapes
- ◆ Essential project materials
- ◆ Reactivation of servers for remote access

SNL's industrial hygiene team monitored air quality and noise levels prior to re-entry. During the retrieval, outdoor noise levels were spiking up to 109 decibels (db) at the corner of SNL Building A, closest to the gas well. As a reference, DOE requires hearing protection in work environments at 85db and above.

SNL-Albuquerque senior staff arrived Monday morning with the team to provide support. It was the second day on a new job for Les Shephard, SNL vice president, Energy and Infrastructure Assurance, who acknowledges he would prefer visiting under better circumstances. SNL representatives met with the city's administrator and emergency management coordinator, as well as drilling company representatives, who explained their options for well control.

In the minutes prior to the re-entry, Shoemaker's director, Dennis Berry of SNL-AL Nuclear and Risk Technologies Center reiterates that retrieval logistics are about employee safety and managing risk. "Spewing gas flames, loud noise, and risk uncertainty create an unacceptable work environment," Berry says. The focus is keeping employees out of harm's way.

Announcements



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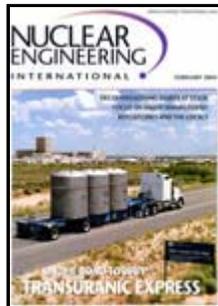
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Shipment Milestone

On March 8, Westinghouse Savannah River Company shipped its 10,000th drum of transuranic waste to WIPP, reaching a major milestone. As a result of the site's accelerated cleanup efforts, this 10,000-drum milestone comes 12 years ahead of the original schedule.



Scott published in international journal

The cover story of the February issue of *Nuclear Engineering International* is an article on WIPP. The article was written and submitted by **Susan Scott, WTS Communication**. The issue also contains a short article on CAST Transportation's role at WIPP. The photographs used with both articles and on the magazine's cover were taken by WTS Communication employee **Alan Rostro**. Graphics were also provided by WTS Communication employee **Dirk Roberson**.

Sandia National Laboratories (SNL) offers scholarships

SNL and parent company organization Lockheed Martin Corporation, are offering Carlsbad High School graduates two scholarships of \$1,000 each. Unlike some awards, the Thunderbird Awards are not GPA-based (although students must have at least a 2.5 GPA to apply). The purpose of the awards is to recognize the efforts of students who may have successfully overcome adversity to complete their high school education and who plan to move on to some type of post-secondary or vocational training. The 2004 Thunderbird Award applications are now available through the Carlsbad High School counselor's office.

WTS announces workforce reduction

WTS announced an involuntary reduction of its workforce that will affect 8 to 12 employees. This involuntary reduction is the second phase of a workforce restructuring plan announced last month. During the first phase of this plan, more than 30 WTS employees volunteered for separation from the company and obtained incentives and other benefits.

The success of the voluntary separation program has significantly minimized the number of employees affected by the involuntary reduction. The exact number of involuntary separations will be known when WTS completes the voluntary separation program on Thursday, March 18. WTS employees affected by the involuntary reduction are eligible to receive separation pay, displaced worker medical benefits, tuition assistance, job placement assistance and relocation assistance.