TRU TeamWorks

August 5, 2004

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

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By the Numbers

Transportation and disposal statistics are now available on pages 3 and 4.

Golan is acting EM manager

Those who work with Paul Golan call him energetic, hard working and resourceful. Golan was recently named Acting Assistant Secretary of Environmental Management for the Department of Energy. He replaces Jessie Roberson, who left the Department last month for family reasons.

Golan will manage a widespread organization, comprising 39 active sites nationwide. The agency's primary responsibility is to clean up U.S. nuclear weapons production facilities. In the course of weapons-making, some facilities were left with areas of contaminated soil and water; EM is committed to restoring those sites to environmentally protective levels. Much of the defense TRU waste stored at these facilities will be shipped to WIPP for permanent disposal as part of the clean-up effort.

Golan has more than 20 years of experience in U.S. nuclear operations, contracting, decommissioning and regulatory management. He earned a bachelor's degree in physics from Loyola University in Chicago and a master's degree in executive management from Northeastern University of Boston. A former navy officer, Golan began his career as a certified nuclear engineer in the U.S. Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program.

He served as director of non-nuclear operations at Rocky Flats from 1990 to 1995, rising to deputy manager of the Rocky Flats Field Office in 1999. In 2000, he was assigned to DOE headquarters as Chief of Staff to EM-1 followed by Chief Operations Officer and then assigned to the position of Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Environmental Management Program in 2004.

Asked about his priorities as acting EM manager Golan says, "I hope to consolidate the many successes realized under Jessie's leadership. In the public's interest, we will continue an aggressive cleanup schedule. I look forward to the technical and social challenges that lie ahead."

EPA solicits public input on WIPP compliance recertification application

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) held five WIPP-related public information meetings last week in Carlsbad, Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico. The meetings were held to solicit public input on the WIPP Compliance Recertification Application (CRA).

Though the meetings drew mixed attendance numbers, the comments and questions presented covered a variety of topics. According to WRES manager of EPA compliance programs, Steve Kouba, stakeholder comments fell into three main areas: comments on the WIPP mission, technical comments unrelated to the CRA and technical comments pertinent to the CRA.

One major topic was a July 14 returned shipment to INEEL. “EPA representatives did not comment on the topic,” notes Kouba, “Because NMED, not EPA, has legal authority over hazardous waste disposal.”

DOE’s high-level waste inventory was also identified by stakeholders as a concern. “The definition that separates high-level waste from defense remote-handled TRU waste can be confusing,” explains Kouba. “Members of the public were concerned that DOE will reclassify high-level waste into RH-TRU. EPA representatives reminded stakeholders that high-level waste is prohibited at WIPP, recognizing that confusion of waste definitions was understandable.”

Other pertinent questions dealt with air monitoring at WIPP, the site’s permanent markers system and availability issues related to electronic vs. hard copy distribution of the CRA.

“One of the questions raised concerned the absence of recent operational changes that were not included in the CRA,” comments Kouba. “We explained that the cut-off date for data to be included in this CRA was September 30, 2002. Any changes made after that time will be addressed in the 2004 Annual Change Report and the next five-year recertification application.”

Though the meetings were sponsored by EPA, WIPP subject matter experts were available to offer detailed explanations when needed. WTS Communication employees Dirk Roberson and Mike Antiporda also assisted EPA with some requested changes to posters and handouts after the Carlsbad meeting.

“The participation by all of the WTS, SNL and LANL subject matter experts and other WIPP team members involved made these meetings a success,” states Russ Patterson, DOE compliance certification manager. “Our EPA counterparts and the public were very grateful.”

Stakeholder questions were answered as they were given during the meetings and all public comments were noted for consideration in the completeness determination EPA will render this fall. Stakeholders are invited to continue to submit questions to EPA until the public comment period is closed by EPA.

Once EPA decides that the application is complete, the agency will have six months from that date to review the application and determine WIPP’s continued compliance to disposal regulations. Throughout the process, the WIPP CRA team will be asked to respond to questions from EPA regarding the application.

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The Roswell incident

On July 23, a shipment en route to WIPP from the Rocky Flats Environmental Technology site was involved in a traffic accident with a passenger vehicle just outside of Roswell, New Mexico on the truck relief route. No injuries were reported in either vehicle. The accident occurred around 10:45 p.m.

The driver of the passenger vehicle was cited for failure to yield at an intersection – stop signs had been placed there a month earlier.

The passenger vehicle collided with the right front fender and wheel hub of the WIPP tractor. Ironically, the driver of the passenger vehicle was a Carlsbad resident.

While the tractor sustained minor damage, neither the trailer nor the three TRUPACT-II payload was damaged.

A WIPP truck travels U.S. 285 south of Artesia, New Mexico.

According to procedure, radiological surveys were conducted to ensure there was no contamination release.

The damaged tractor and TRUPACT-IIs were taken to a state police compound in Roswell where a thorough Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance Level VI inspection was performed. A replacement tractor was dispatched from Carlsbad, and the shipment was back on the road by 1:20 a.m.

To date, WIPP trucks have logged 5.7 million miles and more than 2,800 shipments without an at-fault accident.

“We are concerned anytime one of our shipments is involved in an accident, unfortunately we cannot control the actions of the other drivers we share the road with,” said Kim Jackson, manager, WTS Transportation. “Our drivers are some of the best in the industry and their overall performance proves just that.”

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By the Numbers

Shipments scheduled to arrive at WIPP week of 08/08/04 - 08/14/04: **22**

Hanford - **3**
RFETS - **15**
SRS - **4**

(subject to change)

2,846 total shipments received at WIPP as of 08/04/04

Countdown to closure: the transition from one active waste disposal room to another

Long before a waste disposal room is filled and the next room is used, many activities must be planned, coordinated and executed to allow a seamless transition and minimize the impact to waste handling operations. It all begins at…

Disposal room: an area of the WIPP mine where waste is disposed. Rooms have openings on both ends to allow mine air to flow through. These are called intake and exhaust openings.

T minus three months:

As a room is filled with waste, Ty Zimmerly of the Mine Engineering department tracks the location of the waste containers and determines the estimated closure date of the active room.

T minus two months:

Mine Operations begins initial preparations to the new room. Chain-link fencing and brattice are staged at both the intake and exhaust openings of the active room. These materials will be used to barricade the room from entry and seal it from air ventilation once it is filled and no longer active.

Brattice: A cloth partition used to control ventilation in the mine.

T minus one month:

The new room's ventilation bulkhead is replaced with a temporary bulkhead. The room floor is leveled in preparation for stacks of waste containers.

T minus one week:

Active room closure begins shortly before the last drum is emplaced. The Health Physics connex, ventilation regulator and continuous air monitors (CAMs) are moved to the new room. The CAMs are strategically placed to monitor the new room while continuing to monitor the active room.

Bulkhead: A metal barrier used to direct mine air flow into areas where it is needed.

These changes are generally completed over a three-shift period by several groups. On the first shift, Health Physics completes the required radiological surveys and determines the work permits needed. Then Zone 4 and Zone 1 maintenance crews move the connex and CAMs. On the second shift, Mine Operations personnel move the regulator and complete any roadwork or barricade preparations that may be needed. On the final shift, the Zone 4 crew places the CAMs in the final position and completes the functional test to these units.

Connex: A mobile storage/cargo container used as temporary office space in the WIPP underground.

T minus 1 day:

When the active room receives its last waste container, waste handling operations are stopped and radiological surveys are completed. Mine Operations drops and secures the chain-link and brattice barricades on the intake side of the room and then removes the temporary bulkhead in the new room. The chain link and the brattice cloth barricade on the exhaust side of the full room is then secured. This process generally requires approximately fours hours to complete before waste handling operations can resume.

And almost immediately the countdown begins again.

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By the Numbers

Waste disposed in the WIPP underground as of 08/04/04:

53,698 waste drums

3,350 standard waste boxes

1,116 ten-drum overpacks

Stepping up safety by standing down

The July 22 edition of TRU TeamWorks featured WTS' outstanding safety record. However, in the realm of safety, there can be no end to success. Safety is a continuous effort: a road that never stops.

Last week's universal WTS safety stand-down is an example. The departmental stand-downs weren't due to a WIPP safety incident, but were instead proactive measures taken in light of two recent fatalities at DOE sites elsewhere in the country.

Employees at the Hanford Site and the Savannah River Site each mourned the loss of a co-worker who was performing a seemingly ordinary task. The tragedies are stark reminders of how important safety is personally, to families and coworkers.

The purpose of the safety stand-down was not to reflect on achievements, but to look forward to continuing safe work. In a recent message to employees, WTS General Manager Steve Warren challenged employees "to continue to ensure that every job, every day, for you and your team, is safe."

As we celebrate safety milestones at WIPP, we must remember to keep our eyes on the road ahead.

Be safe. It's important to all of us!

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Technology entrepreneur program may benefit local economy

National laboratories are known for creating cutting-edge technology, but new programs may soon make them equally renowned for creating jobs, jobs and more jobs.

Chad Twitchell, SNL-CPG's point man on economic development.

Meet Chad Twitchell. He's SNL-CPG's point man on economic development. Talking about SNL's Entrepreneurial Separation to Transfer Technology program, Twitchell becomes animated. "The focus of the program," he says, "is to move cutting edge technology and intellectual property from national laboratories out to the commercial market."

The National Nuclear Security Administration-sanctioned program allows lab employees to take a two-year leave with a possible one-year extension to use laboratory-developed technology in the private sector. Lockheed Martin's Technology Ventures Corporation (TVC) is available to assist with new business set-up and legal issues related to use of SNL intellectual property. TVC also provides a series of workshops on putting a business together and perhaps most importantly, brings together program participants and potential investors looking for technology-based business opportunities.

When the leave time expires, or if a business does not succeed, employees have the option of permanently leaving the lab to pursue private enterprise or return to the lab.

While the program has experienced success in northern New Mexico, it is just now being made available to Carlsbad and southern New Mexico. Twitchell is quick to share economic development credit with other WIPP organizations. "LANL-CB has a similar program for its employees and WTS has provided a tremendous amount of economic development support," he says, referencing a recent WTS donation of $50,000 to the Carlsbad Department of Development (CDOD) for economic development activities. "In fact, we all recently gathered at a meeting with representatives from the CDOD, TVC and New Mexico State University."

Twitchell hopes that the program will benefit CDOD business recruitment efforts. "Given the right incentives, there are certainly opportunities for technology-based businesses to move to Carlsbad." Not only specific to WIPP, transferred technologies can benefit other parts of the local economy, such as the agriculture, oil and gas industries.

If Twitchell's efforts and those of other WIPP participants succeed, Carlsbad may very well find itself on the cutting-edge of economic development.

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LANL scientist map the evolution of a virus

Alan Lapedes, a University of California scientist working at LANL with collaborators from the University of Cambridge (England) and the World Health Organization National Influenza Center at Erasmus Medical Center (Rotterdam, Netherlands), has developed a computer modeling method for mapping the evolution of the influenza virus. The method could soon help medical researchers worldwide develop a better understanding of certain mutations in influenza and other viruses that allow diseases to dodge the human immune system.

In a paper published in the July 16 edition of the journal Science, the team of scientists from the United States and Europe describe their work quantifying and visualizing the antigenic and genetic evolution of the influenza A (H3N2) virus from its initial introduction into humans in 1968 up to 2003. The study resulted in a map that shows the virus evolved as a series of 11 closely related virus clusters as it has sought to elude human immunity over the decades.

The mapping method will allow researchers involved in vaccine development and viral surveillance programs for influenza and potentially for other pathogens such as Hepatitis C and HIV, to quantify and visualize the evolution of these viruses. It can assist in monitoring antigenic differences among vaccine and circulating viral strains and can help in quantifying the effects of vaccination. The approach also offers a route for predicting the relative infection success of emerging virus strains.

According to Lapedes, a computational biologist, “This collaboration was particularly exciting because it involved close interaction between experts in computation and virology and medicine. Once we had created the map, we tested its reliability by making hundreds of predictions of how well certain strains might match up and then conducting laboratory tests to check the predictions. It’s very gratifying that this basic research also has practical application to an important human pathogen, influenza.”

Experts estimate that influenza epidemics cause an estimated 500,000 human deaths worldwide each year. Although antibodies provide protective immunity to influenza virus infection, the antigenic structure of proteins that stimulate immune responses changes significantly over time, a process known as antigenic drift, so in most years the influenza vaccine has to be updated to ensure sufficient efficacy against newly emerging variants.

Birthdays

Pat Allen (L&M) - August 10
Bruce Faulk (WTS) - August 10
Ann Morissette (WTS) - August 10
Lisa Roback (RSI) - August 11
Katie Chester (L&M) - August 12
Billy Roback (WTS) - August 12
Al Tornabene (L&M) - August 13
Maggie McNabb (CBFO) - August 15
Steve Travis (WRES) - August 19
Norman Whitlock (WTS) - August 19

2005 safety calendar planned

The Safety Awareness Committee is planning a 2005 safety calendar and is looking for WIPP employees' best snapshots. Employees may submit up to two snapshots in either print or electronic format. The deadline for submitting pictures is Tuesday, August 31.

Snapshots can be submitted to Mak Walker in person, by WIPP mail or by e-mail. See the latest issue of the Porcelain Press or contact your representative on the Safety Awareness Committee for complete guidelines and other details.

To the WIPP team:

Starting in August, I will be working for Westinghouse Anniston in Anniston, Alabama. It has been my pleasure to work with each of you and I consider myself lucky to have worked with so many incredible people for the last thirteen years.

To Cathy, Mel, Berry, Jon, IQ, DQ, Bruce, Ruben R., MAM and the rest of the QA family: Thank you for all the opportunities. I will miss the arguments - I mean discussions we all shared. You're a great bunch of people! Well, as far as QA folks go, that is!

To the old crew of Jeff W., Bob N., Ruben C., Roy, Tony D., Robert S., Joe W. and Genero: It was great, thanks!

To everyone else, thank you.

John Gran