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ENERGY



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For Immediate Release

WIPP UPDATES: Underground Recovery Process Begins

Initial Results Show no Airborne Radioactive Contamination in Underground Shafts

CARLSBAD, N.M., March 9 – Nuclear Waste Partnership (NWP), the management and operations contractor at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) for the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), has initiated the first phase of an underground recovery process that will lead to the resumption of nuclear waste disposal operations at WIPP.

Over the weekend (March 7 and 8), radiological and air quality instruments were lowered down the Salt Handling and the Air Intake Shafts, to check for airborne radioactivity and to determine air quality. The preliminary findings indicate no detectable radioactive contamination in the air or on the equipment lowered and returned to the surface. Air quality results were also normal. These results were expected because the shafts that were sampled were not in the air flow path coming from the area where the radiation release originated.

“This process is critical in helping determine the proper personal protective equipment needed for our personnel entries,” said Tammy Reynolds, WIPP Recovery Process Manager for NWP. “We will do a final analysis of these samples before we send anyone down. The safety of our employees is foremost during this process.”

“This is a positive way to begin the recovery process. In order to get to this point, a lot of work has taken place and it involved a lot of time-consuming activities,” said Joe Franco, Manager of the Carlsbad Field Office. “But the recovery process is underway. We are receiving information that will get us to the next steps in the process.”

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After completing required safety inspections of the hoisting equipment and the Salt Handling and Air Intake Shafts, the next step in the recovery process will be sending qualified site personnel into the WIPP underground facility, which may occur as soon as the end of the week. The objective of the personnel entries is to characterize the mine's stability and attempt to identify the source of the release.

Once the team completes an inspection of the shafts to ensure they are safe, they check for levels of air and surface contamination between the Air Intake and Salt Handling shafts. At that point, the team will make its way down to the area of the repository where operations were being conducted prior to the radiological release, doing radiological sampling and checking for quality as they go.

Then the team will isolate the source of the release and implement a plan to remove the contamination hazard.

BIOASSAY RESULTS UPDATE

The results of bioassay testing of employees who may have been exposed during the recent radiation release at WIPP continue to come in. As of March 8, a total of 17 employees have tested positive for just over background for contamination in fecal samples. (This includes the 13 employees who were initially tested immediately after the event, and other employees who have been subsequently tested.). There has been no detectable contamination in urine samples, which indicates contamination was not inhaled into the lungs.

The levels of exposure are extremely low, and none of the employees is expected to experience any health effects from the exposures. The four most recent positive results were at the barely detectable level (about .1 disintegrations per minute), and reflect extremely low levels of exposure.

During recent public meetings, we were asked about the differences in testing results and approaches. The different sampling methods available to measure internal contamination enable health physicists to estimate how much radiation may have entered the body, to assist physicians in determining whether a treatment is appropriate to reduce the amount of radiation in the body, and to monitor its elimination from the body over time.

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As we continue to receive bioassay results we will update the public as appropriate.

LATEST AIR SAMPLING DATA POSTED TO THE WEB SITE

The most recent air sampling data that has been received and verified can be found at <http://wipp.energy.gov>. Data continues to show that no significant contamination has been found offsite, and that no adverse health effects are expected for the public or the environment from the Feb. 14 event.

NOTE TO EDITORS AND THE PUBLIC

This is the first in a new series of regular updates on the status of recovery activities at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant. News releases will continue to be issued as appropriate. In addition, there will be town hall meetings, and DOE Carlsbad Manager Joe Franco will issue frequent letters to local citizens. We are committed to updating our web site regularly, you can now follow us on Twitter at @WIPPNEWS, or you can call the WIPP Information Line at 800-336-9477 with any questions.