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WIPP UPDATE: April 18, 2014

CBFO Manager's weekly update to local residents

Read Carlsbad Field Office Manager Joe Franco's letter to Eddy and Lea County residents for the week of April 14: at http://1.usa.gov/1mkxm7b

Town Hall Questions Answered

Q. What is the condition of Panel 7 right now?

A. Work teams entering the underground facility as part of ongoing Phase 3 activities are still working to determine the full condition of Panel 7. Initial entries indicate good roof conditions.

Q. What's the presumed reason that Station A is not non-detect for alpha?

A. Within days, readings at Station A dropped dramatically after the February 14 event. Currently, Station A readings fluctuate around the non-detectable range. This indicates there is not an ongoing event in the underground; however, since the exhaust drift is contaminated, we expect Station A to periodically detect small amounts of contamination as the air passes through the exhaust drift to the surface toward the filter banks.

Q. Was Phase 1 your first time into mine after the truck fire?

A. Site employees and accident investigation team members were able to enter the underground facility after the fire; entries stopped following the February 14 radiological event. Phase 1 was an unmanned entry after the radiological event where employees lowered detection equipment into the mine.

Q. How many teams are you going to be having?

A. During Phase 3, we anticipate using two teams for each entry into the underground facility.

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Q. What is the material of the suit? Do coveralls protect against all kinds of radiation? What protects against the radiation?

A. There are several types of protective suits. The coveralls used for WIPP re-entries are made of OREX fabric with a PVC face shield. The material is very strong and durable, but highly breathable to reduce heat risks. The suits protect workers from loose surface alpha and beta contamination. For more information on how time, distance and shielding are used to protect against external radiation, visit: http://www.epa.gov/radiation/understand/protection_basics.html.

Team members entering the underground facility are also using proper respiratory protection to prevent inhalation of radioactive material.

Q. What are the turn back limits for Phase 3?

A. The Radiological Work Permit turn back limits for Phase 3 are 5,000 Derived Air Concentration (DAC)/hour for workers wearing BG-4 respirators and 500 DAC/hour for workers wearing PAPR respirators. DAC measures the concentration of radioactive material in air that could result if an individual breathes that air for a year. If any member of the team feels there is a safety issue, they have the authority to stop work immediately.

Q. Have they discussed potential use of robots?

A. Robots from Sandia National Laboratories and Los Alamos National Laboratory are on standby to support Phase 3 operations. If needed, the robots will be configured to meet the needs of the project, but they will only be used if workers cannot access the suspected contamination source.

Q. What's the lowest detection level for the new CAM at Station B?

A. The lowest detection level in the Central Monitoring Room for the new CAM at Station B is 0.1 DAC/hour. DAC measures the concentration of radioactive material in air that could result if an individual breathes that air for a year.

Q. Why is three weeks an acceptable time span for lab results?

A. Detailed and accurate laboratory analysis takes time. Analysts are measuring very small amounts of radioactivity, identifying specific isotopes and comparing it to normal background radiation. This also takes into account the time required for these materials to decay, which is required to accurately capture the amounts potentially deposited.

Q. Where are these samples going? Who is Stewart Jones with?

A. At the April 10 town hall meeting, Stewart Jones from URS Regulatory and Environmental Services talked about environmental sampling. The samples were analyzed at the WIPP Laboratories.

Q. Where are the air samplers? Are all 10 of the locations new sampling?

A. WIPP's sampling locations can be found on the WIPP website at: http://www.wipp.energy.gov/wipprecovery/sampling_results.html

Q. When is the general workforce returning to the site?

A. CBFO and NWP are planning a phased return to the WIPP site, with workers returning to perform recovery activities and work to other areas of the facility as appropriate and with any necessary safety considerations taken into account.

Q. How do we know if the 5 rem per year exposure limit is being exceeded? Has worker exposure been measured routinely?

A. The U.S. Department of Energy Total Effective Dose Limit for workers is 5 rem (5,000 millirem) a year. However, the WIPP Administrative Control Level is 0.150 rem (150 millirem). We monitor external occupational exposure through dosimeters, which employees wear, and we monitor internal occupational exposure through our bioassay program. The total effective dose is determined by adding the effective dose from external exposures and the committed effective dose from intakes.

Q. Has there been any investigation into people stopping fracking area around WIPP?

A. There is no drilling allowed on the 16-square-mile WIPP Land Withdrawal Area.