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# Radioactive contamination detected on WIPP container

## Operations suspended for 4 hours after discovery

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CARLSBAD — Waste Isolation Pilot Plant operations were suspended for about four hours Thursday after a patch of radiation contamination was found on the outside of an inner lid of a TRUPACT-II nuclear waste container.

Workers discovered the radiation at about 7 a.m. while unloading a TRUPACT-II container shipped from the Rocky Flats site in Idaho, according to Dan Balduini, Westinghouse

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**Dan Balduini**  
Westinghouse  
spokesman

## Contamination

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spokesman. Operations resumed at about 11 a.m., after a full search for additional contamination was conducted.

TRUPACT-II containers have an outer lid and an inner lid, and the contamination was discovered after workers checked the inner lid for radiation contamination, he said. No radiation contamination was found on the outside of the container.

Balduini said a full investigation would be conducted. “We do not know the source of the contamination, but we know it was not from WIPP,” he said.

Drums inside the TRUPACT-II were also tested, and they were uncontaminated, Balduini said. “The contamination did not come from the waste inside the TRUPACT-II,” he said.

There are three types of radiation, alpha, beta and gamma, and all three were found in the radiation sample, Balduini said.

The alpha radiation levels were at 100 disintegrations per minute, which exceed acceptable limits,

according to Cuan-fu Wu, Energy Department senior technical adviser for WIPP. The beta and gamma portions were so low they were at background radiation levels.

Alpha radiation is the least penetrating form of radiation and can be stopped by a sheet of paper; beta is more penetrating — a block of wood could stop it. Gamma is the most penetrating — a material as dense as concrete is required to stop it.

Initial chemical analysis indicates the contamination was from Americium-241, a radioactive element that does not occur naturally, Balduini said. The patch of radiation was small, and was found within a 100-square-centimeter area tested on the lid.

Radiation contamination was found on the outside of a shipment early in WIPP’s history, but the contamination was determined to be naturally occurring radon decay products, he said.

Energy Department officials were not required to report the incident because the radiation levels were so low, but want to keep the public informed about incidents at WIPP, Balduini said.

