

# The Dallas Morning News



## FAX TRANSMISSION

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DATE: 4-5-01

Number of Pages (including cover) four

Thanks Much.

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# Area to be in path of nuclear shipments

## Some fear waste poses risks on I-20

By Bill Lodge

Staff Writer

No one provides a specific date, but state and federal officials agree that 2001 is the year that Interstate 20 through Dallas and Tarrant counties becomes a plutonium path to a nuclear graveyard in New Mexico.

That's good news in the opinion of some government spokesmen. Those officials view more than 35,000 tons of radioactive waste — left over from the production of Cold War bomb-grade plutonium — as safer for highway transportation than for storage at four current locations east of the Mississippi River.

It's bad news, according to some environmentalists and anti-nuclear activists who believe even the slightest risk of a release of long-lived plutonium is too much of a gamble where public safety is concerned.

And it's an additional concern for some local officials who long have viewed hazardous transports through southern Dallas County as particularly dangerous because of I-20's lack of continuous service roads.

For the first time, I-20 will deliver plutonium-contaminated waste from the eastern half of the United States as early as the end

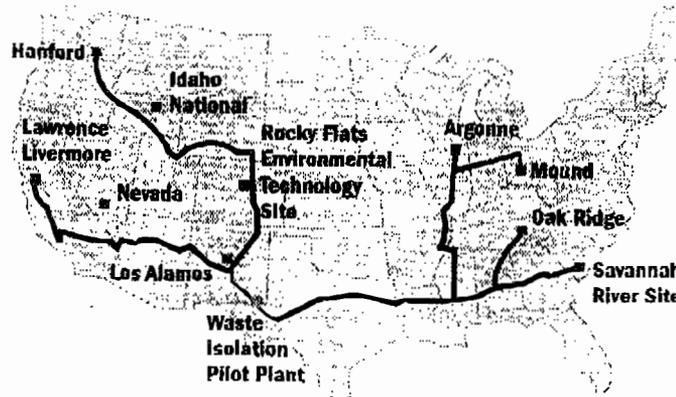
of this month or as late as December. The time is unknown because of approval pending from the state of New Mexico.

### 9 tons on the road

The first truck, loaded with about 9 tons of steel-encased transuranic waste, will roll westward from the Department of Energy's Savannah River Site in Ai-

## WASTE SHIPMENTS

As of last week, 141 transuranic waste shipments from the western half of the United States have been sent to the storage facility near Carlsbad, N.M. Shipments from the eastern half of the United States will begin later this year.



Site	Trips	Miles traveled
Argonne National Laboratory	0	0
Hanford Site	5	9,040
Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory	36	50,112
Los Alamos National Laboratory	17	5,814
Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory	0	0
Mound Plant	0	0
Nevada Test Site	0	0
Oak Ridge National Laboratory	0	0
Rocky Flats Environmental Technology Site	83	65,902
Savannah River Site	0	0
<b>Total shipments to WIPP</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>130,868</b>

SOURCE: Waste Isolation Pilot Plant

Staff Graphic

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News

Feb 3, 2001

ken, S.C. That truck will use I-20 to pass through Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. Then it will plow through Texas, including southern Dallas and Tarrant counties, on its way to the southeastern corner of New Mexico.

The journey will end in a desert about 26 miles southeast of Carlsbad at the Energy Department's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, known as WIPP. Over the next 34 years, federal officials hope to repeat the process 4,299 times from four eastern sites now used for storage.

At the WIPP, the nuclear trash — plutonium-contaminated clothes, tools, gloves and other toxic or radioactive materials — will be loaded onto elevators and

taken 2,150 feet underground, where it will be entombed in rock-salt formations.

Energy Department officials say they do not expect any radiation to be released during any of the thousands of highway trips that will be made over the next three decades. And they note that none of the 141 shipments already received by the WIPP from sites west of Texas has leaked any waste on other interstate highways.

Jim Giusti, a spokesman for the Savannah River Site, said last week that officials hope to send their first shipment through Texas either this month or by early March.

Please see NUCLEAR, 20A.

# Nuclear disposal trek to begin this year

Continued from Page 1A.

Steve Zappe, WIPP project manager for the New Mexico Environment Department's hazardous waste bureau, said federal officials may be too optimistic with that prediction. He would not make a specific prediction on behalf of state regulators, but said the first shipment should be authorized by New Mexico sometime this year.

## Three-hour warning

Dallas officials must be alerted when each of the waste trans-

ports leaves Louisiana and enters Texas.

Capt. Benny Howard, hazardous materials coordinator for the Dallas Fire Department, said firefighters are prepared to handle any accident that involves a radiation release. He said he does not expect any such release, even if a truckload of radioactive waste is involved in a major traffic accident.

"The way these things [huge stainless steel containers used for the waste shipments] are designed, they can survive heat of 1,400 degrees Fahrenheit for up to 30 minutes," Capt. Howard said. "We don't expect any problems."

Capt. Howard said most of the waste will have only a low level of radioactivity. "If you inhale a particle into your system, then it's dangerous. But we've been training for this for 12 years. Our hazardous-materials team is well-prepared for a radiological accident."

Lisa Guc, a policy analyst for the nonprofit Public Citizen's critical mass energy and environment program in Washington, D.C., said firefighters in cities along I-20 must be well-trained to

protect residents from plutonium poisoning.

Should a waste container be breached and its contents consumed by fire, smoke could drop microscopic plutonium particles over populated areas, Ms. Guc said. Anyone who inhaled as much as 0.08 milligrams of plutonium would develop fatal lung cancer, she said.

"Plutonium is dangerous for 240,000 years," Ms. Guc said. "Once it's inhaled, it concentrates in the lungs, and it continues to emit radiation. It's insidious because it's not noticeable. It doesn't have a taste or smell."

Arjun Makhijani, president of the Maryland-based Institute for Energy and Environmental Research, said he believes the eastern wastes should be left at their existing storage sites in Illinois, Ohio, Tennessee and South Carolina.

"Needless transportation should be avoided," said Dr. Makhijani, whose degrees are in physics and electrical engineering. "These wastes are reasonably and safely stored where they are now."

## Gridlock possible

In Duncanville, City Council member Grady Smithy expressed growing frustration over what he described as I-20's increased danger for residents.

"If they're going to do this through congested areas, they ought to put in some service roads for safety purposes," said Mr. Smithy, who has argued for years that a spill of any hazardous material on I-20 would immediately cause gridlock in Duncanville and jeopardize both homeowners and highway travelers.

"We didn't ask to be the hazardous materials route," Mr. Smithy added. "I think the federal government ought to pony up some money."

At the WIPP, Energy Department spokesman Greg Sahd would not promise that there would never be a fiery highway accident or terrorist attack that could contaminate Dallas or another southern city with plutonium wastes.

"Nobody could say that," Mr. Sahd said.

## Unyielding containers

But Mr. Sahd said the steel container that holds plutonium waste can survive a 30-foot drop onto an unyielding surface. He

## TRANSURANIC WASTES

### What are they?

Tools, clothing, glassware, solvents and other materials contaminated with radioactive plutonium, neptunium, americium, curium and californium during the production of nuclear weapons

### Where do they come from?

Argonne National Laboratory-East in Argonne, Ill.; Mound Plant near Miamisburg, Ohio; Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Oak Ridge, Tenn.; and Savannah River Site in Aiken, S.C.

### How safe are the transports?

The material will be shipped in protective containers and tracked by satellite at all times. Television equipment will permit Energy Department officials to see and speak with the truck drivers.

### What are the health risks?

Transuranic wastes are considered more dangerous than uranium tailings and low-level wastes but less dangerous than spent fuel from nuclear power plants. If inhaled, microscopic quantities of plutonium can cause lung cancer.

### How long will the U.S. Department of Energy be transporting these wastes across Texas?

An estimated 34 years

SOURCES: U.S. Department of Energy; the Energy Department's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant; The Energy Department's Savannah River Site; Public Citizen; the National Safety Council's Environmental Health Center

said it can't be punctured by a 40-inch drop onto a 6-inch-diameter steel bar or collapsed by the pressure of 50 feet of water.

"This thing works," Mr. Sahd said. "It passed with flying colors."

Some people and organizations believe the WIPP poses an unnecessary threat to people in Texas and other states, Mr. Sahd said, but Energy Department officials believe the project eliminates more serious threats, including those posed by terrorists.

"What is worse?" Mr. Sahd said. "A single truck carrying 42 55-gallon barrels of radioactive wastes ... or to have a fire or explosion in a plastic building with thousands of barrels?"

"We consider ourselves environmentalists," Mr. Sahd said.

"We're here to protect people ... by taking these dangerous materials away from populated areas."

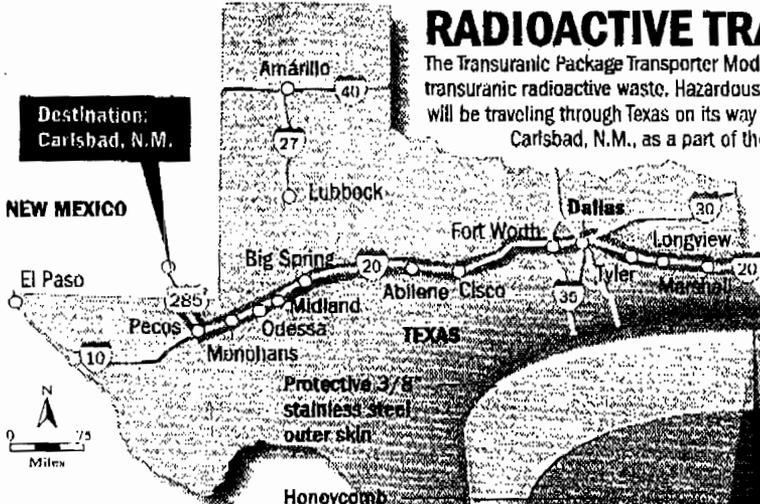
Mr. Sahd added that West Texas residents in the Pecos River region need not worry that radioactive waste at the WIPP will contaminate their water supply.

Please see SOME, 21A.

# Some officials say nuclear waste journey may pose hazards

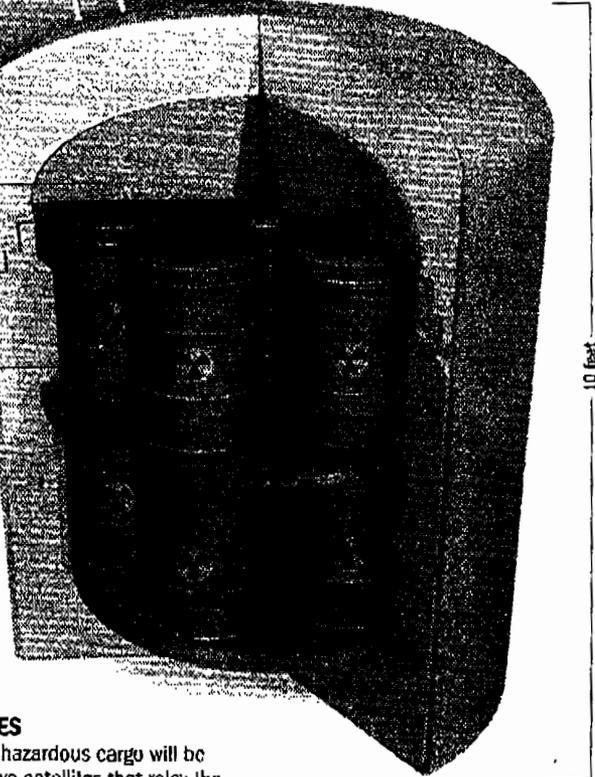
## RADIOACTIVE TRAIL

The Transuranic Package Transporter Model 2 (TRUPACT-II) is designed to carry transuranic radioactive waste. Hazardous waste from the eastern half of the nation will be traveling through Texas on its way to disposal in rock-salt formations near Carlsbad, N.M., as a part of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant.



### THE TRUPACT-II CONTAINER

A look inside the container carrying transuranic radioactive waste:



### CONTAINER TESTING

A wide range of testing was done on the containers to ensure the protection of its contents. A look at some of the tests:

#### FREE-DROP:

The container is dropped 30 feet on to a flat concrete surface, striking the container at its weakest point.

#### PUNCTURE TEST:

The container is then dropped almost 4 feet onto a 6-inch diameter steel bar at least 8 inches long.

#### BURN TEST:

The container is drenched with jet fuel and ignited to a temperature of 1,475 degrees for 30 minutes.

#### IMMERSION TEST:

Separate container is subjected to external pressure equivalent to being under 50 feet of water.

**Capacity:** Fourteen 55-gallon drums  
**Weight:** 19,000 pounds when loaded

### TRANSPORT VEHICLES

The trucks carrying the hazardous cargo will be tracked constantly by two satellites that relay the information to the Department of Energy.



SOURCES: Waste Isolation Pilot Plant; Department of Energy; Dallas Morning News research

nonprofit Southwest Information Research Center in New Mexico, is not convinced.

"We don't think there's a strong possibility [of water contamination] for many years," Mr. Hancock said. "But 240,000 years is a long time. We think the site will leak in the long run."

Mr. Hancock also said it is unlikely that a truckload of plutonium waste will break open on I-20.

But he added that history provides many reminders that "things that couldn't happen have happened."

The underground salt formation surrounding the waste "is 250 million years old," Mr. Sahd said. "It is geologically stable, and none of the wastes will get into the ground water."

Don Hancock, director of the

LAYNE SMITH / Staff Artist