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WIPP: Underground operations suspended pending federal review

Carlsbad Current-Argus

February 7, 2014

By Brandon Bowers

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It's too early to know when normal operations at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant might resume after an underground vehicle fire on Wednesday prompted an emergency evacuation of the nuclear waste repository.

Department of Energy spokeswoman Deb Gill said a federally appointed team of investigators will need to evaluate the site before workers at WIPP will be allowed to resume accepting shipments of transuranic waste. WIPP, located 26 miles east of Carlsbad, is the nation's first transuranic nuclear waste repository, used to permanently dispose of low-level nuclear waste from government sites around the nation

A truck used to haul salt from the mine caught on fire Wednesday morning, resulting in the evacuation. Six employees were later treated for smoke inhalation at Carlsbad Medical Center. No other injuries were reported.

The underground will remain closed until the investigators sign off on the site, Gill said.

"At this time, operations are suspended and there's no estimate how long that process will take," she said. The investigators will be appointed by the Department of Energy and could include participation by the Mine Safety and Health Administration, she said. Gill couldn't say whether the fire suppression system on the truck worked as expected, but she said it would likely be a part of the team's investigation. Calls to the DOE's Washington, D.C. headquarters were not returned.

The fire occurred near the site's salt mine shaft, away from the location where nuclear waste is disposed. In a video sent to the Current-Argus, black smoke could be seen rising from the shaft. "The important thing is that the public was never in danger, and there were no injuries," she said.

Limited ventilation was reestablished to the mine late Wednesday night, after WIPP's mine rescue team re-entered the underground and confirmed the fire had been extinguished. The team confirmed the air in the underground was safe to breathe, according to a press release.

Shipments to WIPP were stopped as the fire continued, but resumed shortly thereafter, Gill said. Two shipments from Idaho have been received at the facility and will remain in storage above ground until the mine reopens, she said.

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Work resumes at WIPP following fire

Hobbs News-Sun

February 7, 2014

CARLSBAD (AP) — Work has resumed at southeastern New Mexico's nuclear waste repository. But officials say they don't yet know what caused the truck fire that forced an evacuation of the underground site.

A spokesman says an investigation will be conducted at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, where low level waste from the nation's nuclear weapons plants is stored in salt beds.

The site was evacuated and six people were treated for smoke inhalation after a truck hauling salt caught fire Wednesday.

New Mexico Republican Rep. Steve Pearce characterized the event as a minor. And he emphasized that the fire never threatened radioactive waste or public safety.

WIPP reacts to underground fire

World Nuclear News

06 February 2014

No damage or injuries were reported after a fire and evacuation at the WIPP waste disposal facility in New Mexico.

Owned by the Department of Energy (DoE), the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) disposes of transuranic waste packages from the US military in an underground salt formation. One of the trucks used to haul salt underground caught fire yesterday shortly after 11am, said the DoE.

The underground complex of tunnels, shafts and disposal rooms was evacuated in response to the fire and “multiple” employees taken to hospital for potential smoke inhalation, said the DoE. They were discharged within a few hours with no ill effects reported.

One of WIPP’s mine rescue teams entered the complex several hours later and confirmed the air was clear and safe to breathe. The fire was found to be extinguished, and a second team doused the truck with foam to prevent potential re-ignition.

Work resumes at nuke repository following fire

KPHO-TV CBS5 Phoenix, AZ.com

Posted: Feb 06, 2014 2:04 PM MST

Updated: Feb 06, 2014 2:04 PM MST

CARLSBAD, N.M. (AP) - Work has resumed at southeastern New Mexico’s nuclear waste repository. But officials say they don’t yet know what caused the truck fire that forced an evacuation of the underground site.

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The site was evacuated and six people were treated for smoke inhalation after a truck hauling salt caught fire Wednesday.

New Mexico Republican Rep. Steve Pearce characterized the event as a minor. And he emphasized that the fire never threatened radioactive waste or public safety.

WIPP is the nation’s first and only deep geological nuclear waste repository. It takes plutonium-contaminated waste from Los Alamos National Laboratory and other federal nuclear projects.

DOE information about WIPP fire

lamonitor.com

Thursday, February 6, 2014 at 12:23 pm

The Department of Energy released a statement Wednesday on the fire at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant. According to the release, a mine rescue team entered WIPP and confirmed that the fire was extinguished. Late in the day, WIPP officials were working on a plan for safe re-entry to the underground storage area, but no time frame had been determined at that time.

A joint information center was established in Carlsbad. Public inquiries about WIPP can be made to the center by calling 575-234-7380 or 800-336-9477.

Other information can be found at WIPP's website, wipp.energy.gov.

WIPP back to work after salt truck burns

Albuquerque Journal

February 7, 2014

CARLSBAD – The cause of a truck fire that forced an evacuation at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant is still unknown, but work at the nuclear waste repository resumed on Thursday.

A spokesman says an investigation will be conducted at the plant, where low-level waste from the nation's nuclear weapons plants is stored in salt beds.

The site was evacuated and six people were treated for smoke inhalation after a truck hauling salt caught fire Wednesday.

Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., characterized the event as minor and emphasized that the fire never threatened radioactive waste or public safety.

Air In Underground Nuclear Waste Facility Is Safe, Fire Is Out

KUNM

By Christine Trudeau and the Associated Press

UPDATE 5:30p 2/6: Work has resumed at southeastern New Mexico's nuclear waste repository. But officials say they don't yet know what caused the truck fire that forced an evacuation of the underground site.

A spokesman says an investigation will be conducted at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, where low level waste from the nation's nuclear weapons plants is stored in salt beds.

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WIPP is the nation's first and only deep geological nuclear waste repository. It takes plutonium-contaminated waste from Los Alamos National Laboratory and other federal nuclear projects.

UPDATE 8:30a 2/6: Plant officials say a fire at the federal government's underground nuclear waste repository in southeastern New Mexico has been extinguished.

A news release and spokeswoman answering an emergency line late Wednesday say the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant's mine rescue team went into the underground site near Carlsbad and confirmed a fire in a truck hauling salt is out. The team also says the air is clear and safe to breathe.

Joint Information Center member Susan Scott says a second team is surveying the extent of the damage and that there's no information on the cause of the blaze or when the site would reopen.

Plant officials say all employees were evacuated from the underground site after the fire broke out about 11 a.m. Wednesday, and none of the radioactive waste was affected.

UPDATE 5:30p: Authorities say six people have been released from the hospital after being treated for smoke inhalation.

Emergency officials say they are unsure what sparked the blaze at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, but all employees were evacuated and none of the radioactive waste has been impacted.

All operations at the site have been suspended indefinitely.

KOB-TV reports Representative Steve Pearce in a statement called the incident a "minor fire."

It is critically important to note that at no point did the fire threaten the waste disposed of at the WIPP, nor was the community or public ever at risk," he said.

KOAT-TV reports the fire is out.

An underground fire at a storage facility for nuclear waste in southern New Mexico has led to evacuations and trips to the hospital.

At 11:00am Wednesday, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad, New Mexico was evacuated due to an underground fire.

According to the Department of Energy, the fire began when a truck hauling salt underground caught fire. Multiple people were taken to a local hospital due to smoke inhalation.

The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant is the final resting place for transuranic radioactive waste left over from nuclear weapons production and research.

“There’s no risk of additional material being affected,” said Roger Nelson, a spokesman for the Department of Energy. “In other words, there’s no radioactive waste or hazardous materials that are part of this event.”

Nelson says, shipments of radioactive waste from around the country to the site have been temporarily halted, and that the fire will be allowed to run its course.

Minimal damage from NM nuclear repository fire

Miami Herald

February 6, 2014

The Associated Press

CARLSBAD, N.M. -- Crews declared a blaze at an underground nuclear repository in southeastern New Mexico snuffed out and determined that there was minimal damage after a truck hauling salt caught fire and prompted an evacuation.

Two mine rescue teams went into the earth at the Carlsbad-area Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, where the federal government seals away its low-grade nuclear waste, including plutonium-contaminated clothing and tools. The teams determined the fire was no longer burning and reported the air was clear and safe to breathe, a news release and Susan Scott, a spokeswoman who answered an emergency line, said late Wednesday.

All employees were evacuated from the underground site after the fire broke out about 11 a.m. Wednesday, and none of the radioactive waste was affected, plant officials said. Six people were treated for smoke inhalation and released a short while later.

Early Thursday, officials said the situation was stable and firefighting foam was applied to prevent embers from reigniting. Emergency response efforts wrapped up but an investigation is underway in an effort to get the plant safely back online, a statement said. A phone call to the plant early Thursday went unanswered.

No information was released on what caused the blaze or when the site would reopen.

The statement early Thursday said employee training and emergency efforts protected workers and minimized equipment damage.

At a Wednesday afternoon news conference, officials said the fire occurred on a truck in the facility's north mine, the Carlsbad Current-Argus reported. Nuclear waste is stored in the south mine, officials said.

Fire suppression systems and rescue teams were immediately activated, and all waste handling operations were suspended, officials said.

Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., issued a statement characterizing the event as a "minor fire."

"It is critically important to note that at no point did the fire threaten the waste disposed of at the WIPP, nor was the community or public ever at risk," he said.

The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant is the nation's first and only deep geological nuclear repository. It takes plutonium-contaminated waste from Los Alamos National Laboratory and defense projects, and buries it in rooms cut from underground salt beds.

Nevada's Yucca Mountain is another underground site built as a potential repository for used nuclear fuel, but it is not operational, said Rod McCullum, the director of used-fuels programs at the Nuclear Energy Institute.

The New Mexico facility receives 17 to 19 shipments each week from sites around the country, including Los Alamos and installations in Idaho, Illinois and South Carolina.

The repository is licensed by the federal Environmental Protection Agency every five years, McCullum said.

US nuclear repository evacuated after fire

perthnow.com.au Perth Australia

AAP February 06, 2014 7:59AP

FIREFIGHTERS have scrambled to contain an underground blaze at a US nuclear waste plant which sparked an evacuation of staff, some of whom were treated in hospital, officials said.

The blaze erupted on a vehicle carrying salt at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) near Carlsbad, New Mexico, the US Department of Energy (DoE) said in a statement.

Emergency response teams responded to “an operational emergency” at the plant, which is used to dispose of radioactive waste left from making nuclear weapons.

“All underground personnel are accounted for and have been safely evacuated to the surface,” it said, adding: “There is no waste in the vicinity of the fire.”

Waste handling operations have been suspended while “multiple employees” were transported to a local hospital for potential smoke inhalation after the blaze, which erupted around 11.00am, it said.

In an update a few hours after the incident, they said all those taken to hospital had been released, adding that officials “are working on a plan for safe re-entry to the WIPP underground.”

The plan would have to be approved by the US Mine Safety and Health Administration, and “no time frame has been determined” for re-entry into the underground location.

No contamination escaped as a result of the fire, a spokeswoman for the site, Sona Herrick, told the Albuquerque Journal, adding that the truck involved hauls salt mined as part of the radioactive waste storage operations.

The New Mexico site is “the nation’s first repository for the permanent disposal of defence-generated transuranic radioactive waste left from research and production of nuclear weapons,” according to the DoE.

The plant, some 435 km southeast of Albuquerque, is used to dispose of material including plutonium-contaminated waste from the Los Alamos National Laboratory, about 480 km away, also in New Mexico.

Carlsbad is about 110 km from Roswell, the infamous site of a mysterious 1947 crash which spawned conspiracy theories that the military had covered up a UFO landing, and captured aliens inside the alleged extra-terrestrial craft.

Underground truck fire prompts evacuations at nuclear repository in southeastern NM

The Republic, Columbus, Indiana

The Associated Press

February 05, 2014

CARLSBAD, New Mexico — Emergency crews are battling a fire in the federal government's underground nuclear waste repository.

Officials say a truck hauling salt caught fire about 11 a.m. at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad.

According to a press release and a spokeswoman who answered the emergency line, all employees have been evacuated and none of the radioactive waste has been impacted. But a press release says "multiple employees" are being transported to a local hospital for potential smoke inhalation.

Emergency officials say all waste handling operations are suspended and rescue teams have been activated.

UPDATED: Underground Truck Fire At Carlsbad Nuclear Waste Facility

KRWG TV/FM

Public Media for Southwestern New Mexico and Far West Texas

February 05, 2014

Emergency crews battle a Wednesday fire in the federal government's underground nuclear waste repository in southeastern New Mexico.

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According to a press release and a spokeswoman who answered the emergency line, all employees have been evacuated and none of the radioactive waste has been impacted. But a press release says "multiple employees" are being taken to a hospital for potential smoke inhalation.

Emergency officials say all waste handling operations are suspended and rescue teams have been activated.

The repository takes plutonium-contaminated waste like clothing, tools and other debris from Los Alamos National Laboratory and defense projects. The waste is then buried in rooms cut from underground salt beds.