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4 Remaining

Nuke workers prepare return to WIPP

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Posted: Saturday, March 22, 2014 3:00 pm | Updated: 6:02 pm, Sat Mar 22, 2014.

Associated Press | 5 comments

CARLSBAD — Employees at the federal government's troubled nuclear waste dump in southeastern New Mexico are preparing to enter the facility's underground mine for the first time since a radiation leak contaminated workers last month.

The U.S. Department of Energy announced Saturday that 35 workers have undergone training simulations at a Potash mine before re-entry next week into the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant.

Employees went through a two-hour underground session using protective gear and air-breathing units, officials said.

Workers spent this week training for various scenarios that could occur in the mine.

According to the Department of Energy, the plan is for workers to set up an operating camp near a salt-handling shaft and then check for a secondary exit in the shaft that controls air flow. After that, they will focus on finding the source of the radiation release.

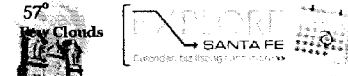
The repository near Carlsbad stopped taking all waste shipments after an underground truck fire on Feb. 5. Nine days later, a radiation release shuttered the plant. A series of shortcomings in maintenance, safety training, emergency response and oversight were cited by a team that investigated the truck fire.

The New Mexico Environment Department withdrew a preliminary permit this week for the dump's request to expand its facility, citing the fire and the leak.

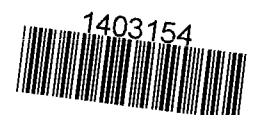
It is unclear, however, if the two incidents are related.

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The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant is the nation's only permanent underground repository for low-level radioactive waste, including things like plutonium-contaminated gloves, tools and protective clothing, from nuclear weapons facilities.


With the nuclear waste dump shuttered, operators for the plan made an agreement with Waste Control Specialists to ship radioactive waste from Los Alamos National Laboratory to rural west Texas.

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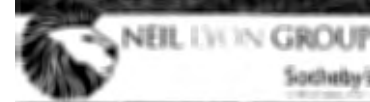
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