



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF  
**ENERGY**



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*For Immediate Release*

## **Follow-Up Testing Shows No Health Risk for Exposed Employees**

CARLSBAD, N.M., March 5, 2014 – Follow-up testing of employees who were exposed to airborne radioactive material during the February 14 radiation release at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) shows exposure levels were extremely low and the employees are unlikely to experience any health effects as a result.

After initial testing indicated potential low level exposure, follow-up biological samples taken from the 13 employees who were at the WIPP site during the event came back negative for plutonium and americium, the two radioactive isotopes that were detected in preliminary bioassays.

“We have sent samples to the Center for Disease Control for validation.” said Farok Sharif, President and Project Manager of Nuclear Waste Partnership. “Biological testing continues on other workers who were at the site following the initial exposure event, and there is always the possibility of positive exposure results from that testing. The ability to detect extremely small amounts of radioactive material also means there may be false positives that occur throughout the testing process.”

Nuclear Waste Partnership (NWP), the WIPP management and operating contractor, is working with the United Steel Workers Union to make sure all employee health concerns are addressed, and that testing is made available to any worker who feels he or she may have been contaminated during the WIPP release event.

“We appreciate DOE’s support and NWP’s willingness to work with our employees to ensure their safety and welfare,” said Ricky Fuentes, President of United Steelworkers Local 12-9477. “Open lines of communication between the Union and NWP have been established to ensure everyone is being checked for possible contamination.”

Activities at WIPP since the event have been focused on ensuring the health of employees and the safety of the environment around WIPP, understanding the source of the radiation leak, and

developing and implementing a recovery strategy that will eventually allow waste disposal operations to safely resume at the nation's only deep geologic repository for transuranic nuclear waste.

"We continue to make progress in all of these areas," said Joe Franco, Manager of the U.S. Department of Energy's Carlsbad Field Office, which oversees WIPP and the National Transuranic Program. "Our contractor will be making sure any potentially exposed employees are tested. The ongoing air and environmental monitoring around the WIPP site, both by our contractor and by independent parties, is showing no significant off-site contamination. Finally, we are preparing to send monitoring devices into the mine to determine air quality conditions in the repository in preparation for sending personnel into the mine to identify cause and develop the corrective actions."

Only essential personnel have been allowed access to the site since the event. Upon leaving the site, each individual is checked for any external contamination.

Please see Joe Franco's letter to the community at <http://www.wipp.energy.gov/>.