

With Waste Dump Closed, Where To Put Nuclear Leftovers?

by Geoff Brumfiel

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3 min 47 sec

Workers are about to re-enter a New Mexico waste dump that was hit by a recent accident. The incident is shaping up to be yet another setback in the quest to find a home for America's nuclear waste.

AUDIE CORNISH, HOST:

In New Mexico, the nation's only nuclear waste dump is closed. It's been several weeks since radioactive material was detected in the air at the site. As NPR's Geoff Brumfiel reports, the incident is shaping up to be yet another setback in the quest to find a home for America's nuclear waste.

GEOFF BRUMFIEL, BYLINE: If you live near a nuclear power plant - and a lot of you do - then you're living near something else: nuclear waste. Right now, pretty much every plant in the country stores its own used nuclear fuel. It's been there for decades but it's going to be radioactive for a lot longer. And that leads to an important question.

JIM CONCA: Do you want to just leave the waste where it is or do you want to actually put it in a place that will be secure for 200 million years?

BRUMFIEL: That's Jim Conca, a geologist at Columbia Basin state. The government's original plan for old nuclear fuel called for putting it into Yucca Mountain in Nevada. But in 2009, after decades of legal delays and environmental concerns, President Obama killed the project. Suddenly, the nuclear industry got interested in another site, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico.

Right now, WIPP, as it's called, holds a lot of radioactive junk left over from the Cold War - contaminated clothing and tools. But Conca thinks it could hold pretty much anything.

CONCA: It is the best place to put nuclear waste of any sort from any source.



BRUMFIEL: WIPP has a series of tunnels and rooms deep underground cut from an ancient bed of salt left over from when New Mexico was an ocean.

CONCA: The nice thing about massive salt like this - I mean, it is massive, 10,000-square-miles, 2,000-feet thick - it's solid, it's molecularly tight. So it takes about a billion years for water to move an inch.

BRUMFIEL: In other words, Conca thinks it would be perfect for storing old nuclear fuel from the power plants. But WIPP has plenty of opponents. Don Hancock is with the Southwest Research Information Center in Albuquerque, an environmental group. He says WIPP isn't a good solution. For one thing, it's completely surrounded by people for oil and gas. He says all this interest in WIPP actually comes down to . Nuclear plants want to get rid of their waste and so they look at it and say...

DON HANCOCK: Oh, there's only one hole in the ground with nuclear waste in it, so maybe we ought to see what else we can put there.

BRUMFIEL: Then on February 14th came a major accident. It's believed that a chunk of salt fell from the ceiling onto a drum or drums. Radioactive dust came out. Some of that dust made it to the surface and at least 13 workers on the site inhaled it. Nobody has been back into WIPP since.

HANCOCK: I would hope that the idea that this facility could handle more waste has now pretty much been totally debunked.

BRUMFIEL: Jim Conca, who supports the WIPP expansion, still thinks it could work. The data he's seen so far shows the accident was contained underground. WIPP's safety systems worked.

CONCA: I mean, no one would get hurt. No one is contaminated enough to get cancer in the future. There's no environmental effect.

BRUMFIEL: Still, the accident will have to be cleaned up, new safety procedures will have to be developed, regulators will have to review the changes.

CONCA: My feeling is that it'll take about a year to get WIPP operational again.

BRUMFIEL: The U.S. government still says deep underground is the best place to store nuclear waste from power plants. But after this accident, it's just less clear than ever where underground to put it. Geoff Brumfiel, NPR News.

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Comments:

Robert Chase • 5 hours ago

Badly confused -- Brumfiel states as fact that radioactive dust reached the surface, then cites the proponent of more storage of waste as stating the opposite, but does not attempt to address the contradiction.

Clovis Sangrail • 6 hours ago

Whatever happened to the nuclear waste disposal sites at Point Reyes and Center Ossipee?

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ben balz • 6 hours ago

Where to keep cold war leftovers? The US doesn't like to think about the insane dangers of nuclear power, and the fact that its after-effects linger for many thousands of years. Maybe the US could convince Japan to take our deadly, radioactive detritus. They seem to be doing a Heckuva Job Brownie with Fukushima.

Geoff Brumfiel

Science Correspondent

Science correspondent Geoff Brumfiel's reports on physics, space, and all things nuclear can be heard across NPR News and on NPR.org.

Brumfiel has carried his microphone into ghost villages created by the Fukushima nuclear accident in Japan. He's tracked the journey of highly enriched uranium as it was shipped out of Poland. For a story on how animals drink, he crouched for over an hour and tried to convince his neighbor's cat to lap a bowl of milk. He became a full-time correspondent in March of 2013.

Prior to NPR, Geoff was based in London as a senior reporter for *Nature Magazine* from 2007-2013. There he covered energy, space, climate, and the physical sciences. In addition to reporting, he was a member of the award-winning *Nature* podcast team. From 2002 – 2007, Brumfiel was *Nature Magazine's* Washington Correspondent, reporting on Congress, the Bush administration, NASA, and the National Science Foundation, as well as the Departments of Energy and Defense.

He began his journalism working on the American Physical Society's "Focus" website, which is now part of .

Brumfiel is the 2013 winner of the Association of British Science Writers award for news reporting on the Fukushima nuclear accident.

He graduated from Grinnell College with a BA double degree in physics and English, and earned his writing from Johns Hopkins University.