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Congressman Pearce hosts WIPP forum

By Zack Ponce

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CARLSBAD >> Congressman Steve Pearce hosted one of the more entertaining public gatherings since multiple events at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant caused the facility to stop operations.

Country twang, mixed with harmless jabs at Department of Energy officials, lightened the mood during a town hall meeting that Pearce moderated at the Leo Sweet Center on Friday. Nearly 200 people in the audience were all brought to laughs or chuckles at some point, but the seriousness of the gathering was not lost.

Carlsbad residents and Southeastern New Mexico politicians all sought clarity into the safety procedures and issues of the nation's only repository for transuranic nuclear waste.

"The safest place for waste to be is underground at WIPP, it's not even a question," said David Klaus, deputy undersecretary for management and performance at the DOE, in response to a question about finding alternative waste storage means.

The audience seemed to understand the basic issues regarding the radiation leak, and they instead demanded answers to some lingering questions about last month's fire.

A blaze started on the back of a truck used to haul salt that is mined underground at WIPP on the morning of Feb. 5, forcing immediate evacuation to the above-ground portion of the facility.

Joe Franco, DOE Carlsbad Field Office manager, spoke of the events in more vivid detail than has been usually mentioned in previous news conferences and public meetings.

According to Franco, the driver of the vehicle spotted what he described as "orange and yellow flares" in his rear-view mirror and quickly parked the vehicle to try and stop the blaze.

"He reached out and grabbed a fire extinguisher and attempted to put out the fire," Franco described of the man's efforts to quell the fire. "The fire extinguisher worked but the foam didn't hit the flames in the right spot to put it out. The location of the truck made it difficult for him."

Once the attempt failed, the unidentified worker fled the mine along with all other employees. The DOE had just begun site investigations into the cause of the fire when the Feb. 14 radiation leak was detected, according to Franco.

The DOE does also not yet know whether the fire suppression systems of the salt hauler triggered or not.

Franco also confirmed a rumor that WIPP employees had shifted the filtration during the fire.

"The fact that we just found out that a rumor was actually true is the exact reason why we are all here," Pearce said to some applause.

Nuclear Waste Partnership employees sent an unmanned probe underground into an area where they think no contamination exists on Friday afternoon and the DOE hopes to have a human underground investigating the cause of the radiation leak sometime next week.

"The reason why I am so cautious here is because people say that WIPP is a national treasure," Pearce said during the meeting. "I say WIPP is important but it is not a national treasure, the national treasure is the support from the people in this community for something that is extremely important for the nation."

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Congressman Steve Pearce talks during Friday's forum at the Leo Sweet Center.

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