Congressman Pearce hosts WIPP forum - Carlsbad Current-Argus

By Zack Ponce

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - 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 hand-slamming jokes at Department of Energy officials, lightened the mood during a town hall meeting that Pearce moderated at the Leo Short 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 mixed underground at WIPP on the morning of Feb. 5, forcing immediate evacuation to the above-ground portion of the facility.

Joe Ponce, DOR Carlsbad Field Office Manager, spoke of the events in more vivid detail than had usually been mentioned in previous news conferences and public meetings.

According to Ponce, the driver of the vehicle spotted what he described as "orange and yellow flames" 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." Ponce described of the man's efforts to quell 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 Ponce.

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

Ponce also confirmed a rumor that he said during the town hall meeting. "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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