



LANL seeks alternative to WIPP for waste storage

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By [Jeri Clausing / Associated Press](#)

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With the nation's only underground nuclear waste dump shuttered by a mysterious leak, Los Alamos National Laboratory has begun looking at alternatives for meeting a June deadline to remove toxic waste from a mesa on its northern New Mexico campus.

Lab spokesman Matthew Nerzig confirmed Tuesday that officials are exploring other options for removing the last of nearly 4,000 gallons of plutonium-contaminated tools and protective gear from its bomb-building labs if the Waste Isolation Pilot Project (WIPP) in Carlsbad remains closed indefinitely.

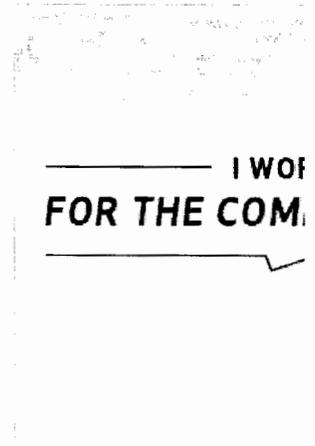
The presence of that waste – some of which was dug up from decades-old, unsealed dumps in the northern New Mexico mountains and is now stored outside with little protection – came to the public's attention three years ago as a massive wildfire lapped at the edges of the sprawling lab property.

The lab has since agreed to have it all removed from the mesa by the end of June. The lab was ahead of schedule for getting the nearly 4,000 barrels to WIPP when back-to-back accidents and a radiation released closed the repository last month.

"We are determined to complete the campaign on time and meet our obligations to the state of New Mexico," Nerzig said. "Toward that end, we are evaluating options to minimize any adverse impact of the WIPP event on LANL (the Los Alamos National Laboratory) and other transuranic waste-generator sites."

He did not say, however, what those alternatives might be. Options could include shipping the waste temporarily to another federal site, such as the Idaho National Laboratory, said watchdog Don Hancock

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of the Southwest Information and Research Center, an Albuquerque-based environmental organization.

WIPP has been shuttered since early February. Shipments were halted after a truck hauling salt through the repository's tunnels caught fire. Nine days later, the plant's alarms were triggered by a radiation release. Officials say at least 17 workers were exposed to low levels of radiations and radioactive particles have been detected in the air around the plant.

It could be weeks before workers can get underground to determine what happened and make an assessment about when the repository might be able to begin taking waste again.

WIPP is the federal government's only underground repository for nuclear waste and is a cornerstone of the Department of Energy's \$5-billion-a-year program for cleaning up legacy waste scattered across the nation from decades of making nuclear bombs.

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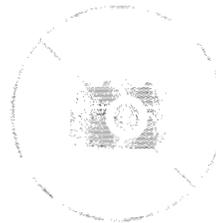
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