

## Radiation experts: No health risks for WIPP workers

By Zack Ponce

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CARLSBAD >> Radiation experts recently visited with employees at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant to remedy lingering fears over health.

Two professionals from the MJW Corporation, a radiation consulting firm based in Amherst, New York, spoke with the entire WIPP workforce for about two hours on Monday morning concerning any future risks from last month's radiation leak.



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Dr. Ronald Goans, an occupational and radiation medicine professional, and Mitch Findley, a senior health physicist, told the group there was no danger given the miniscule amounts of radiation exposure that were detected.

"To put it bluntly, this is just a non-issue medically," Goans said. "The stress of worrying is worse than the event itself. It's hard to explain that though if you're scared."

Goans holds a doctorate degree in physics from the University of Tennessee and a Doctorate of Medicine from George Washington University School of Medicine. He has consulted with victims of radiation exposure around the world and said the case at WIPP is minor compared to some cases he has witnessed.

"If you look at the doses we've talked about, I got almost that much coming on the airplane when I flew from Knoxville down here," Goans said. "People are afraid of the unknown and just with the word radiation. I don't think we've done a good job of explaining these issues."

Three radioactive isotopes cause the most harm and none are found at WIPP, according to Goans. They are cobalt-60, caesium-137 and radium-192.

"Usually those come from very high-level sources that people either touch or they get around," Goans said, adding that he once saw a person in Maryland lose a finger from contact with cobalt-60 and another in South Carolina need an amputation because of exposure to radium-192.

Preliminary fecal samples recently taken by the Department of Energy showed 17 workers had tested positive for americium-241 and plutonium-239+240, four more than the 13 who originally tested positive on Feb. 26. No employee urine samples have ever tested positive for the same radioactive isotopes.

To date about 135 personnel have entered the bioassay testing to detect any radiation exposure and the next round of results are expected by the DOE on March 19.

Goans and Findley think the americium and plutonium particles were likely inhaled but never digested into the workers' bloodstream, meaning no long-term adverse health effects.

"When you breath things in, your mouth and your nose are kind of coated with mucus and it's wet in there so it kind of plates out (the radioactive particles) and then your body just naturally moves it away because your lungs are constantly cleaning themselves," Findley explained. "Things like plutonium and americium stay in the GI tract and they are excreted out, it does not get taken back into the body."

Goans and Findley both said the WIPP employees were engaged in conversation during the meeting and eager to return to work.



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Operations have ceased at the nuclear waste repository that disposes of transuranic, or "TRU", waste since a vehicle used to haul salt caught on fire underground on Feb. 5, forcing evacuations.

Goans thinks the threat of any future health risks to workers at the facility is unlikely.

When asked about the dangers of someone standing in front of an open drum of contact-handled TRU waste, he replied, "I don't even think that would pose a risk."

Reporter Zack Ponce can be reached at (575) 689-7402.

A previous version of this story incorrectly identified the test in which 13 WIPP employees tested positive for radioactive isotopes. Workers have only tested positive in fecal samples and all urinalysis tests have had negative results.

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