

WIPP isn't ready

The DOE needs strict oversight in addressing all of the issues.

By Susan Hirshberg

In the chaos which is now Congress, there are a flurry of bills concerning nuclear issues which cry out for public input. An appalling example is a bill submitted by U.S. Rep. Joe Skeen, R-N.M.

This bill decimates provisions protecting public health and safety at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP). The Skeen Bill (H.R. 1663) does this by proposing radical amendments to the WIPP Land Withdrawal Act, passed in 1992. Skeen recently submitted a column to this publication claiming that the WIPP site is safe and ready.

It is neither.

One of the most serious things that H.R. 1663 does is to drastically weaken the authority of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to oversee WIPP's compliance with environmental safety standards. Without this authority, the Department of Energy (DOE) is essentially self-regulating with regard to WIPP. But the DOE's lack of regard for the environment was the reason that such laws as the WIPP Land Withdrawal Act and the Federal Facilities Compliance Act were passed in the first place.

Never before in human history have we attempted what is being tried at WIPP. The waste intended for

WIPP is called transuranic waste, which means that it is contaminated with extremely dangerous isotopes including those of uranium and plutonium. We cannot afford to be cavalier about the difficulty of isolating this waste from future generations. We cannot afford to add to this uncertainty by being blindsided by politics.

There are many issues where strong action on the part of the EPA is crucial. A few of these are as follows:

Originally, the DOE thought that the WIPP site was dry and that the salt formation would create an impermeable tomb around any waste buried there. However, WIPP is not dry, and numerous pathways exist through which radioactive materials could travel. The EPA has required the DOE to consider engineered barriers to help isolate WIPP waste. The DOE continues to resist the inclusion of engineered barriers. The Skeen bill goes even further by explicitly allowing WIPP to open without them.

The DOE must be required to gather hard data on issues that could seriously impact the safety of the WIPP facility. Instead, the DOE is allowed to seek "expert" opinion, set arbitrary limits on particular factors and use inaccurate estimates to reach conclusions which may be crucial in determining whether WIPP will be safe. Much of this data could be obtained through scientific means.

Without the oversight of the EPA, and with the even more unrealistic timeline presented in the Skeen bill, scientific problem solving will be further sacrificed to political game-playing.

Future human intrusion into the WIPP site is one of the most important factors which could lead to the failure of the facility to keep wastes isolated from the environment. The EPA is the only independent federal agency presently evaluating the DOE's assumptions about human intrusion scenarios and the future effectiveness of posted warnings.

In order to evaluate WIPP's ability to isolate radioactive waste for 10,000 years, it is necessary to know specific quantities of various kinds of waste to be buried, and how radioactive those types of waste will be. The DOE will continue to resist thorough characterization of the waste unless the EPA insists on it.

In addition, the Skeen bill overrides the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) by allowing mixed wastes, which have both radioactive and toxic chemical components, to come to WIPP without treatment or protection against migration into the environment. It also drastically reduces further citizen and public input on WIPP and the opportunities for judicial review.

In his column in this publication, Skeen stresses supposed financial savings that would result if his bill were passed. His statements are misleading. Skeen neglects to mention that the Congressional Budget Office's final analysis was that there would be no significant budgetary savings from opening WIPP early. The \$130 million supposedly saved between 1996 and the year 2000 (about nine months worth of the \$180 million annual basic operating costs) is imaginary since as soon as WIPP opens the full-operating budget will be charged to taxpayers.

The WIPP Land Withdrawal Act, which the Skeen bill seeks to destroy, was clearly a compromise drafted after an enormous amount of effort on the part of the entire New Mexico congressional delegation and the public. It makes no sense to undo all of this work so that Congress can play political games with the safety of the people of New Mexico.

Even if you do nothing else this year on the WIPP issue, write or call your congressmen, particularly U.S. Sens. Domenici and Bingaman, and tell them to oppose any measures that would gut the WIPP Land Withdrawal Act. Let them know that the safety of New Mexicans and other citizens must be their first priority.

NMB

Ms. Hirshberg is nuclear waste and contamination director for the Santa Fe-based Concerned Citizens For Nuclear Safety.



THE SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

Citizens worried about 'atomic laundry'

LANL says the radioactivity in clothes is less than what you find in camping lantern mantles

By KEITH EASTHOUSE
The New Mexican

To longtime Santa Feans, it's known as the "atomic laundry." Located in an unremarkable building on Siler Road with only a small sign on the door pro-

claiming its presence, Interstate Nuclear Services has laundered radioactive-contaminated clothing from Los Alamos National Laboratory since 1961.

Now, a local citizens' group is raising questions about whether the nuclear laundromat poses a hazard to public health and the environment — concerns that are based primarily on a never-before-disclosed 1991 LANL study that found deficiencies in the way the laundry monitors its radioactive effluent.

"There is a myth in Santa Fe that we are separate and safe from Los Alamos related activi-



Kathleen Sabo

"There is a myth in Santa Fe that we are separate and safe from Los Alamos related activities"



Bill Floyd

"I don't think there's a health concern. We're talking about extremely low levels (of radioactivity)"

ties," Kathleen Sabo, executive director of Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, said during a press conference Wednesday at

the organization's Santa Fe headquarters.

Bill Floyd, a regulator with the New Mexico Environment De-

partment, which conducts unannounced inspections of the laundry every two years, said it poses no threat to the public.

"I don't think there's a health concern," Floyd said of the laundry, which discharges radioactive effluent into Santa Fe's sewage system. "We're talking about extremely low levels" of radioactivity.

The Environment Department issued a news release Wednesday saying that, based on prior inspections at Interstate Nuclear Services, "there is no indication of radioactive materials being released into the sanitary sewer

which would exceed regulatory levels."

CCNS is also charging, as a press release distributed at the press conference put it, that "LANL officials have never informed the public about the operation of the laundry."

"The Department of Energy appears to have adopted a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy," Sabo said. "We asked about WIPP," she said, referring to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant. "But we didn't know about this."

Dan Gibson, a former CCNS member, said the group paid

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"marginal attention" to the facility in the late 1980s.

Gibson said the group gathered information about the facility, "but it became apparent there were bigger fish to fry. It never became a significant issue."

Of course, CCNS back then did not have the 1991 LANL report that the current organization has obtained.

The media has been aware of the laundry since at least 1988.

The *New Mexican*, in an Aug. 5 article from that year, revealed the laundry was storing radioactive lint improperly but the problem, in the opinion of a state official, "did not pose a health threat to anyone."

The possibility of locating a new laundry at the laboratory was discussed at a public meeting last October, according to spokesman John Gustafson.

Gustafson said "there has never been any attempt to hide" the laundry's existence.

"Do you need to broadcast an activity that's been going on" for so long, Gustafson asked.

The 1991 report obtained by CCNS makes the following points:

■ The monitoring of radioactive waste by the laundry and the state is insufficient.

Floyd acknowledged the state does not always have a good handle on what specific radioactive

elements are discharged by the plant. But he said the state keeps track of the total amount of radioactivity released by the laundry. He said the levels are typically thousands of times below what is allowed by the state.

■ Laundry personnel have "in the past been without the appropriate emergency equipment in their transport trucks" and were found to be inadequately trained in emergency procedures.

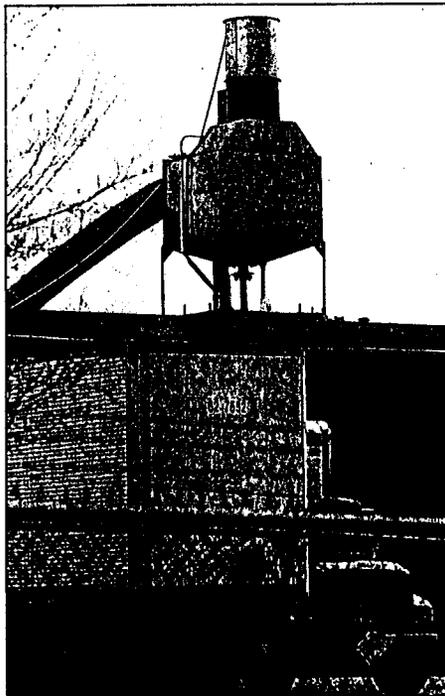
Sabo and Susan Hirschberg, also of CCNS, said some of the clothing that is transported by the laundry through Santa Fe is contaminated with plutonium, much like the waste that would be transported to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad.

Gustafson said the amount of radioactivity on the clothing before it is laundered is less than what is contained in the mantle of a camping lantern. He said that if the amount of radioactivity on clothing is above a certain amount, it is disposed of instead of being given to the laundry.

Sabo and Hirschberg also raised questions about whether sludge from the Santa Fe sewage plant that is sprayed onto a field near Airport Road contains high levels of radioactivity from the laundry.

Floyd said that only very low levels have been found.

"That's not a hot sludge field," he said.



The emissions stack at the Interstate Nuclear Services laundry on 1310 Siler Road protrudes above a parked truck with a radioactive symbol.



Richard McCord

The mice that roared at the lab

In the long annals of mismatches, few have been more lopsided than the ongoing struggle between Los Alamos National Laboratory, which wants to do things exactly the way it wants to do things, and two local watchdog groups, which feel the lab should obey laws, protect the environment, spend money prudently, and examine its role in the nation and the world.

That's why last week's victory of the watchdogs over the lab in an Albuquerque court is both surprising and impressive.

Billions upon billions of taxpayer dollars have been poured into the lab, with billions more coming along. The lab enjoys entrenched political support, from Washington on down. Its staff is enormous and handsomely paid, with top officials pulling anywhere from \$150,000 to more than \$200,000 a year. It is cloaked in an almost-impenetrable mystique, a blend of arcane cutting-edge science and "national security" concerns.

By comparison, the Santa Fe-based Los Alamos Study Group and Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety are ragamuffin operations, dependent on unpredictable donations and grants for their very existence. The handful of paid staff members are lucky to draw their stated \$15,000 or \$19,000 salaries in good years, and make do with less in lean times. No public funds and virtually no politicians assist them in their work.

And yet a federal judge has agreed with the watchdogs that the lab must halt construction of a \$124 million project called the Dual-Axis Radiographic Hydrotest Facility, or DARHT — at least until an environmental impact study is done.

DARHT is being built to test nuclear bombs in simulated explosions in Los Alamos. Conceived in the early 1980s in the midst of the Cold War, when the world was a different place, it was begun without public notice, despite the fact that it would release numerous toxic materials into the atmosphere.

When the watchdogs learned of DARHT and demanded that it conform to laws spelled out in the National Environmental Protection Act, the lab claimed a "categorical exclusion" to the laws, although such exclusions had been banned for years.

The watchdogs kept up their pressure. Finally the lab agreed, just last year, to an environmental review. But it refused to stop construction, which was already \$33 million along and proceeding rapidly. Realizing that the lab meant to go ahead with DARHT regardless, the watchdogs then filed suit.

In ordering the project halted, the judge did not buy the lab's standard contention that the nation's security was at stake.

Thus did two tiny watchdogs thwart, for now, the mighty lab.

Whether their victory will stand remains to be seen. Power has a way of prevailing in the end, and most of the power in this case still resides with the lab. But even if it proves short-lived, this setback is a reflection of changing times.

There was a time when the lab's primary mission was to serve the national interest, by developing nuclear weapons to defend against a similarly armed enemy. But those days have passed. As the only superpower left, we have all the bombs we need.

So now the lab's primary mission — like any bureaucracy's — is to preserve itself: its size, its budget, and the jobs of the well-paid scientists there. There is much good and useful work that they can do, and some of them are so engaged. But many others are bomb specialists, so new bomb projects keep being pushed, whether or not there is any need for them.

An outdated relic of the Cold War that spawned it, DARHT is one such unneeded, leftover project — and an arrogant one as well, in its refusal to comply with the laws. It's good that someone called the lab on it, and good that a judge listened.

Like the child who blurted out that the emperor was wearing no clothes, these watchdogs gaze upon the lab with clearer eyes than those that cannot see through the mystique. And small though they may be, the work that they do is not.