

WIPP RADIATION RELEASE
March 18, 2014

SRIC has carefully followed information about the radiation release from the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) that was first identified at approximately 11:13 pm on Friday, February 14, 2014. The release triggered the HEPA filtration system so that the ventilated air would be filtered before it was released into the environment through the exhaust shaft. We have been actively asking questions – many of which have not yet been answered - and gathering additional information about the contamination event, and have responded to numerous requests for information from the public and media.

The Department of Energy (DOE) WIPP website has a special section on the release and recovery. (<http://www.wipp.energy.gov/special.htm>).

The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) has established a website with background and current information about the release. (<http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/NMED/Issues/WIPP2014Docs.html>).

What we know with some confidence

1. Apparently, one or more of the 258 contact-handled (CH) waste containers underground in Room 7 and Panel 7 (<http://www.wipp.energy.gov/general/GenerateWippStatusReport.pdf>) released radioactive and toxic chemicals. The presumed location of the release is about 1,500 feet from the continuous air monitor that triggered the filtration system. The release spread contaminants through more than 3,000 feet of tunnels, up the exhaust shaft (2,150 feet), into the environment, and to the air monitoring Station #107, approximately 3,000 feet northwest of the exhaust shaft. Thus, the release covered a distance of at least a mile and a half from the area of release to the Station #107. If the release came from Panel 6, which has more than 22,500 CH containers, it may be more difficult to determine many aspects of the release, though the distance that the contaminants would have traveled underground would have been greater.
2. In its modeling analysis of the release, DOE states: “The event took place starting at 2/14/14 at 23:14 and continued to 2/15/14 14:45.” (<http://www.wipp.energy.gov/Special/Modeling%20Results.pdf>). Thus, the release lasted for 15.5 hours. The same DOE document states that the peak time of the release was from 10-15 hours after it started (from approximately 10 am to 3 pm on February 15. The same DOE document also states: “A large shift in wind direction can be seen to occur around 8:30 AM on 2/15/14.”
3. The Station #107 filter was removed on Sunday morning, February 16 at approximately 9:40 am. The Carlsbad Environmental Monitoring and Research Center (CEMRC) laboratory analyzed the filter and on Wednesday, February 19 reported that it found 0.64 becquerels (Bq) per cubic meter of air of Americum-241 and 0.046 Bq per cubic meter of air of Plutonium- 239+240. (<http://www.cemrc.org/2014/02/19/cemrc-detects-trace-amounts-radioactive-particles-air-sampling-station-near-wipp-facility/>).

Those measurements were consistent with waste in the WIPP underground. The DOE agrees that there was a release of radioactivity onto the surface.

4. CEMRC retrieved another filter from Station #107 on Tuesday, February 18. The laboratory analysis showed no detection of Plutonium 239+240 and 0.007 Bq of Americium-241. Samples from Station (about 325 feet from the exhaust shaft) found 0.115 Bq of Plutonium 239+240 and 1.3 Bq of Americium-241. (<http://www.cemrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/CEMRC-Ambient-Air-Sampling-Results-Following-2-14-14-Radiation-Detection-Event.pdf>). On March 17, CEMRC reported: "the latest results show that the ²³⁹⁺²⁴⁰Pu activities have returned to previous background levels." (<http://www.cemrc.org/2014/03/17/new-ambient-air-sampling-results-show-wipp-radiation-levels-continue-remain-low-levels/>).

5. On March 5, CEMRC reported results of the Exhaust Shaft Station A filter (ventilation air before the HEPA filtration) and the Station B filter (after filtration). The Station A filter removed on February 15 (the morning after the radiation alarm was triggered) showed 1,365 Bq per cubic meter of Am-241 and 672 Bq per cubic meter of Pu-239+240. Twenty-four hours after the event, the Station A filter measured 130 Bq/m³ of Am-241 and 17 Bq/m³ of Pu-239+240. By 9 am on February 21, the Station A filter was 0.65 Bq/m³ of Am-241 and 0.06 Bq/m³ of Pu-239+240. A Station B filter installed on the morning of February 14 was removed in the afternoon of February 18 and measured 1.81 Bq/m³ of Am-241 and 0.224 Bq/m³ of Pu-239+240. As of the morning of February 21, a Station B filter were "less than 0.12 Bq/m³ of Am-241 and less than 0.012 Bq/m³ of Pu-239+240 being emitted per day from the WIPP underground ventilation system." (<http://www.cemrc.org/2014/03/05/cemrc-radiological-results-air-sampling-wipp-site-following-february-14th-2014-radiation-detection-event-2/>).

6. As of mid-day on Thursday, February 20, WIPP Manager Jose Franco reported some amounts of radiation were continuously registered in the continuous air monitors for Panel 7, but that the amounts were three orders of magnitude lower than the highest levels of 4.4 million disintegrations per minute (dpm). The 4.4 million dpm is what the Station A filter removed at 6:30 am on February 15 recorded for alpha radiation. The Station A filter also showed 1.2 million dpm of beta radiation. As of 8:30 am on Sunday, March 9, the Station A filter showed 173 dpm of alpha radiation and 300 dpm of beta radiation. (http://www.wipp.energy.gov/Special/Station%20A%20Filter_Readings.pdf)

7. No workers were underground when the radiation leak was detected and none has been underground since that time. As of Monday, February 24, the expectation was that workers could go underground in two to three weeks to investigate the release. In the meantime, plans are being developed for the underground recovery effort and to determine the extent of the above ground contamination. On Thursday, February 27, Farok Sharif, President of Nuclear Waste Partnership (the operating contractor), reported that re-entry and recovery plan(s) had been submitted to DOE, which was reviewing them. After DOE review and approval, the re-entry process would start with two probes being sent to the underground. On Friday, March 7 and Saturday, March 8, two probes were sent down the air intake and salt handling shafts and took measurements.

http://www.wipp.energy.gov/pr/2014/WIPP%20Updates_Underground%20Recovery%20Process%20Begins.pdf) The plan is for workers to re-enter the underground through the salt handling shaft and to investigate the situation to try to determine the source of the radiation release.

8. On Wednesday, February 26, the 13 WIPP employees that had been at the WIPP site when the radiation was detected were notified that they had tested positive for internal radiological contamination, “predominantly americium-241.”

http://www.wipp.energy.gov/Special/CBFO_Mgr_Letter.pdf). Those workers are having additional bioassay (urine and fecal) analyses. The location(s) where the 13 workers were has not been disclosed. On Wednesday, March 5, DOE reported that the urine analysis was negative (no radiological contamination). On Thursday, February 27, Farok Sharif stated that other workers that came to work on the morning of February 15 are having bioassay testing, and some additional workers are requesting to be tested. All workers that want to be tested will be tested. All workers that want to have lung and whole body counts at CEMRC also will be allowed to do so. Laboratory analysis of bioassay samples take one to two weeks. Mr. Sharif also stated that as of that date no workers have received chelating agents that could help remove the internal contamination. On Sunday, March 9, DOE announced that four additional workers that worked on February 15 had tested positively for internal radiation.

http://www.wipp.energy.gov/pr/2014/WIPP%20Updates_Underground%20Recovery%20Process%20Begins.pdf). The statement also erroneously reported: “There has been no detectable contamination in urine samples, which indicates contamination was not inhaled into the lungs.” The next day that statement was “clarified.” On March 12, DOE reported: “Preliminary fecal sample results for 17 personnel, announced earlier, indicated the presence of trace amounts of radioisotopes.... All have been entered into the bioassay program and will undergo whole body counts to determine the presence of isotopes in the lungs. To date, about 135 personnel have been entered into the bioassay program, including those who have requested testing. The next set of bioassay data is anticipated March 19.”

http://www.wipp.energy.gov/Special/WIPP%20Update%203_12_14.pdf)

9. While Jose Franco of DOE has stated that hundreds of air, soil, and water samples have been taken, laboratory analysis of only some samples have been posted on the WIPP website.

http://www.wipp.energy.gov/Special//Air_Soil_and_Water_Monitoring_Results.pdf)

10. On Wednesday, March 12, DOE announced that continuous air monitoring (CAM) is being installed at the Station B HEPA filters in the exhaust shaft by the end of the following week. According to the statement: “...an immediate alarm [would sound] in the Control Room and prompt notification to employees if protective actions are required....Once the CAM is installed, personnel will begin returning to the WIPP site.”

http://www.wipp.energy.gov/Special/WIPP%20Update%203_12_14.pdf)

11. Nineteen shipments of CH waste from LANL (4), INL (8), and Savannah River Site (SRS) (7) are being stored in the Parking Area Unit (PAU)(4 from INL and 4 from SRS), while other shipments and portions of those loads in the PAU are in the CH Bay of the

Waste Handling Building. Those 41 packages of waste have 5,137.4 cubic feet or 145.3 cubic meters of waste. Those shipments arrived at WIPP between January 24 and February 6, but were not taken to the underground because of the vehicle fire on February 5 and the radiation leak.

(http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/NMED/Issues/WIPP_docs/AdminOrderWeeklyReportAndLetter3-17-2014.pdf). On February 26, DOE requested that NMED modify the WIPP operating permit so that, among other things, all of those shipments could stay on the surface at WIPP for a longer period of time than allowed by the permit.

(http://www.wipp.energy.gov/library/Information_Repository_A/Extensions_of_Time/14-1427.pdf). On February 27, NMED approved the request.

(<http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/NMED/Issues/WIPP2014Docs.html>). As a result of the NMED Administrative Order, among other things, DOE must submit weekly reports that provided specific information. The Order provides that DOE must file for any additional extensions to keep the waste on the surface of WIPP by no later than May 7, 10 days before the current deadlines are reached. The Order also prevents WIPP from returning to “normal operating status” with NMED’s prior inspection and approval.

What we do not know (among many other things)

1. What caused the release.
2. What was the nature of the release that allowed some contaminants to travel more than a mile and a half.
3. What radionuclides in what amounts and what toxic chemicals in what amounts have been released.
4. What contaminants were released into the environment before the HEPA filtration system was triggered.
5. What contaminants in what amounts have been captured by the HEPA filters.
6. What contaminants in what amounts have not been captured by the HEPA filters.
7. Where all the contaminants that were not captured are, whether inside the WIPP boundary or outside the site area.
8. Whether the amount of the release and the location of all of the containments can be determined.
9. When radiation levels in the WIPP underground air will return to pre-release levels.
10. The amounts of contamination in the WIPP underground.
11. What underground decontamination will be done.
12. What amount of exposure to radiation and toxic chemicals the first workers going underground will receive.
13. What amount of exposure to radiation and toxic chemicals workers going underground will receive in the future.
14. What amount of exposure that workers on the surface have received.
15. What amount of exposure that workers on the surface will receive in the future.
16. What surface decontamination will be done.
17. What changes in the WIPP operation, monitoring, and safety culture will be implemented.