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4 more test positive for radiation exposure at WIPP

Albuquerque Journal
March 10, 2014

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The Department of Energy announced Sunday that 17 workers at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad have tested positive for radiation contamination, an increase from 13 workers the department previously reported.

The radiation leak was detected Feb. 14 by a WIPP air monitor, and higher-than-normal levels of plutonium and americium, which are cancerous when consumed, were then found. The leak spread from underground, as plutonium was detected at an air sensor a half-mile away. It's the first leak in the plant's 15 years of operation.

Radioactive waste comes to WIPP from federal nuclear weapons research and production sites across the country, including Los Alamos National Laboratory.

The Department of Energy has repeatedly said the leak poses no threat to the environment or human health because contamination levels are relatively low.

The department had previously said it was unknown what health effects the workers who were exposed to radiation could experience, but Sunday's news release said no adverse health effects are expected for any of the workers because the contamination levels are very low.

The four most recent workers to test positive for radiation had barely detectable levels of radiation in their systems, according to the news release.

The radiation was not inhaled by any of the workers, according to the news release.

Radiation and air quality instruments were lowered into some WIPP shafts over the weekend that were not in the path of the contamination, according to the news release, and no radiation contamination has been detected.

After tests on the hoisting equipment and salt handling and air intake shafts are completed, WIPP workers will go into the underground facility, which could be as soon as the end of this week, according to the news release.

Those workers will try to find the source of the leak and do more radiation tests as they go. They will then come up with a plan for how to eradicate the contamination.

Only essential employees are at the plant. The leak came soon after a truck caught fire in the deep mines of the plant. Nobody was injured in that incident, and officials say the leak is not connected to it.

Robot to probe underground at WIPP

Current-Argus

March 6, 2014

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CARLSBAD >> Unmanned probes into the depths of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, located 26 miles east of Carlsbad, are expected to begin within the next week according to Department of Energy secretary Ernest Moniz.

Moniz relayed the news to New Mexico's Congressional delegation during a private meeting in Washington D.C. on Thursday afternoon.

David Klaus, deputy under secretary for management and performance, and David Huizenga, senior advisor for the DOE's Office of Environmental Management, made the trip to Carlsbad from Washington D.C. and said that the DOE is not giving up hope that all radiation particles in WIPP's south salt mine can be eradicated.

"There's no other option for us, we need to go down there, sort it out and make it even safer in the future than it was in the past and get back and

continue operations," Huizenga said.

Radiation was first detected below ground on the evening of Feb. 14 and traces of americium and plutonium were later found outside the site as far as a half mile away from the nation's only nuclear repository for transuranic waste.

Huizenga acknowledged that cleanup of the radiation leak would be difficult but the DOE has a few contingency plans in place.

"The particles are small and indeed the environment down there is challenging in that regard, but we actually have put together contingency plans years ago early on to try and address the situation in the event that this would have occurred," Huizenga said.

A couple of the plans cleanup crews are considering underground at WIPP include mining some of the salt off the existing wall which is done regularly and using sprayable concrete over the contamination areas to get it off the walls.

"It all depends on the data we get on the first entry which is the unmanned piece and then when the manned personnel actually make the entry, they will then recover a lot of information," said Joe Franco, DOE Carlsbad Field Office manager. "They'll be recording and taking sample readings from air monitors so there's a lot of steps that will be taken. We'll need to regroup and (reevaluate.)" Scientists will also eventually begin testing the salt mined in the north mine for radiation contamination. WIPP currently sells the salt to local private industry, including for use as salt feed at local dairies. Franco said he thinks the DOE should be able to continue selling the mined salt.

Fran Williams, a technical advisor for URS, and Farok Sharif, president of Nuclear Waste Partnership, joined the panel to speak to about 200 residents in attendance at the Gerrells Performing Arts Center. New Mexico Environment Department secretary Ryan Flynn was in attendance, along with many local politicians and representatives from the New Mexico congressional delegation. Flynn requested that the DOE begin speaking each day to the city of Carlsbad along with the state of New Mexico.

John Heaton, chairman of the Carlsbad Nuclear Task Force, aired his frustration with the lack of initial communication and updates at previous town hall meetings.

"We need to have a real agenda for those meetings," he said.

Carlsbad Mayor Dale Janway announced Thursday night that he will begin hosting weekly town hall meetings beginning immediately to provide updates as the DOE and NWP begin the process of cleaning up the underground.

Assistant secretary nominated to oversee DOE cleanup

The Augusta Chronicle

March 8, 2014

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The White House has nominated a new assistant secretary for environmental management to oversee cleanup at U.S. Energy Department sites, including Savannah River Site.

Monica Regalbuto was nominated to replace David Huizenga, who served in the position for the past 2½ years. Huizenga will return to the National Nuclear Security Administration, where he worked previously. Regalbuto is currently the deputy assistant secretary for fuel cycle technologies in the office of nuclear energy for the DOE. She is a researcher at Argonne National Laboratory in Argonne, Ill.

MOX standby renews community fears about jobs, site's future

The Augusta Chronicle

March 8, 2014

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For nearly two decades, the Augusta and Aiken areas have been riding waves of uncertainty concerning Savannah River Site's mixed-oxide fuel fabrication facility. Another wave's here.

Last week, the National Nuclear Security Administration began a process to place the multibillion-dollar, under-construction facility on standby in light of continuous federal funding drawbacks. The Obama administration said Tuesday in its fiscal 2015 budget proposal that the Department of Energy needs to assess cheaper alternatives to the facility, which has already cost \$3.9 billion.

The same worries that have concerned stakeholders for years are back: jobs, the local economy, national security and the future of the Savannah River Site.

"It has a national impact but we are the ones who will feel it the hardest, fastest," said Aiken Chamber of Commerce President and CEO David Jameson.

Years before ground was broken in 2007 on the facility intended to process weapons-grade plutonium into commercial nuclear fuel, politicians and area leaders lobbied for the nuclear facility while environmentalists petitioned to keep plutonium out of the area. The first-of-its-kind nonproliferation mission promised thousands of jobs for Savannah River Site.

The MOX site has a current workforce of about 1,800, but more than 2,000 have worked there at points during construction.

A highly skilled construction workforce has completed about 60 percent of the 600,000-square-foot MOX plant. Retaining those jobs has become the focus of area economic partners.

No announcements have been made about layoffs since the president's budget proposal. The NNSA said it will discuss workforce impacts with Shaw Areva MOX Services, the primary contractor for the project.

"We are currently working with the contractor to develop a cold stand-by implementation plan," said NNSA spokeswoman Keri Fulton.

During cold standby, the facility and equipment will be protected from the environment and the site and government documents secured. An analysis of MOX alternatives will be completed in 12 to 18 months.

Rick McLeod, executive director of the SRS Community Reuse Organization, said workers will move out of the area if there are massive layoffs. If the federal government ever resumed MOX, it would be difficult to attract them back to a project that has a reputation for instability.

"It's easy to cut, but how do you start it back and get that trained workforce back," McLeod said.

An economic impact study of Savannah River Site - not just the MOX project - found that 2½ jobs are created in the area for every one job at the South Carolina site. Half of SRS employees live in Aiken County and a third in Georgia, according to the study that examined Columbia and Richmond counties in Georgia and Aiken, Allendale and Barnwell counties in South Carolina.

Jameson said shutting down MOX has a regional and national impact. In addition to layoffs affecting area businesses, the massive construction project has contracts in dozens of states.

"It could be an instant impact. That is a real scenario," Jameson said about potential layoffs.

U.S. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz said last week the administration was committed to a nonproliferation agreement to dispose of 64 metric tons of U.S. and Russian plutonium. MOX had been the chosen path, but it was no longer feasible without a substantial cost reduction.

According to a Government Accountability Office report released last year, construction costs were revised from \$4.9 billion to \$7.7 billion. Most recently, cost estimates for the program's life-cycle ballooned to \$30 billion.

The sky-high costs to build MOX were known from the beginning, said McLeod. Up-and-down budget changes, including the most recent that proposed \$221 million to place MOX plant on standby, contribute to continual distrust in the community, he said.

Clint Wolfe, executive director of Citizens for Nuclear Technology Awareness and a proponent of MOX, said the region has been "betrayed" by the federal government.

"MOX was a 100-percent possibility," Wolfe said. "It's a very serious blow to the future of the site."

Alternatives to MOX offer only a degree of certainty, Wolfe said. During escalating tensions between Russia and Ukraine, the nation needs to focus on plutonium disposition.

"It's a very dangerous time to be playing around with international agreements that have to deal with our national and international security," he said.

The Savannah River Site - a former Cold War weapons site - needs an operation like MOX in its future, said McLeod.

"We don't want to see the site become a closure site," he said. "For new missions at the site, (the federal government) is going to have to look at other things besides cleanup."

Jameson agreed that the site has a dismal future without MOX, and the energy department needs to look at new missions for SRS in addition to cleanup.

Even with the president's proposal, leaders retain a bit of hope that MOX won't be gone forever. The community has gotten used to riding the project's ups and downs, Jameson said.

"The MOX obituary has been written in the past," McLeod said. "This isn't definite."

Senators fight for MOX in letter to DOE

Aiken Standard

March 8, 2014

[LINK](#)

South Carolina's senators - and five others from various states - said the money designated for the MOX facility at the Savannah River Site should be used for construction of the facility and not to put it on a cold stand-by.

U.S. Sens. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., and Tim Scott, R-S.C., joined senators from Georgia, Louisiana and North Carolina in submitting a March 6 letter to the Department of Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz. The letter advocates for the construction of the mixed oxide fuel fabrication facility, also known as MOX.

The other senators included in the letter are U.S. Sens. Saxby Chambliss, R-Ga., Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., Mary Landrieu, D-La., Richard Burr, R-N.C., and Kay Hagan, D-N.C.

President Barack Obama's 2015 fiscal year budget proposal suggested \$221 million to place the MOX facility on a "cold stand-by" while the National Nuclear Security Administration explored other options to dispose of the 34 metric tons of weapons-grade plutonium.

The senators cited fiscal year 2014 appropriations for the MOX program, stating the funds were for construction, and not for putting the program on cold stand-by.

"The \$221 million request is significantly lower than what is needed to maintain on-going operations and construction for MOX, will force major layoffs, and threaten the viability of the only congressional authorized

disposition path for weapons grade plutonium," the senators wrote in the letter. "It is our understanding that the Department of Energy is planning to use fiscal year 2014 funds to begin this process. This would be inappropriate and we discourage this in the strongest possible terms."

The senators added that the funds should be protected by the FY2014 National Defense Authorization Act and the FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act.

"Under the FY2014 National Defense Authorization Act and the FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act, funding is provided for construction activities at the MOX facility. No funds are provided to put the program in cold stand-by."

The letter came after the release of Obama's proposed budget, which calls for freezing construction of the MOX facility - a project that currently employs about 1,800 workers.

"As part of an ongoing analysis of options to dispose of surplus plutonium, the budget provides funding to place the Mixed Oxide (MOX) Fuel Fabrication Facility in cold stand-by, while the NNSA (National Nuclear Security Administration) evaluates alternative plutonium disposition options that will achieve a safe and secure solution more quickly and cost-effectively," the budget states.

The MOX facility is designed to turn weapons-grade plutonium into nuclear reactor fuel.

Its work is part of a nonproliferation effort between the United States and Russia to dispose of weapons-grade plutonium.

The project has undergone cost overruns and delays and most recently, DOE revealed the results of a study that estimates the project could have a life-cycle cost of \$30 billion to complete.

Senate Hearing: Whistleblower Retaliation at the Hanford Nuclear Site

Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Financial and Contracting Oversight
March 11, 2014 (11:00 AM EST)

[BACKGROUND AND VIDEO LINK](#)

Agenda

The Subcommittee's hearing will examine the safety culture at the Waste Treatment Project at the Hanford Nuclear Site, including recent reports of whistleblower retaliation. The hearing will also examine the processes and procedures for addressing whistleblower reports and ensuring that whistleblowers under Department of Energy contracts are protected from retaliation.

Witnesses

Bill Eckroade
Deputy Chief of Operations, Office of Health Safety and Security
U.S. Department of Energy

Matt Moury
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Safety, Security and Quality Programs,
Environmental Management
U.S. Department of Energy

James Taylor
Senior Vice President, Global Management and Operations Services
URS Corporation

Michael Graham
Principal Vice President
Bechtel National, Inc.

This week: Appropriators get down to business

The Hill
March 10, 2014
[LINK](#)

The budget debate is shifting to the appropriations committees as lawmakers begin work on their annual spending bills.

While lawmakers will continue to debate President Obama's budget request, lawmakers have made clear they will ignore the administration's demand for \$56 billion in higher spending.

Against that backdrop, a slew of spending subcommittees next week will spend time discussing fiscal policy with top administration officials, with each touting their own agency's funding requests.

The House Budget Committee will welcome Treasury Secretary Jack Lew on Wednesday as he makes the rounds to sell the president's plan. That same day, the House Ways and Means Committee will discuss the funding requests for the Department of Health and Human Services with Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, in what will likely become another contentious debate over ObamaCare.

Appropriators will be busy digging into various funding requests for a host of agencies. Senate appropriators will talk about the budget request for the Congressional Budget Office on Tuesday, the Department of Homeland Security on Wednesday and the departments of Transportation and State on Thursday.

The latter hearing will mark the return to Congress of former Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), now appearing on the other side of the dais to defend his new agency's funding needs.

House appropriators will eye Homeland Security's request on Tuesday, State and Transportation on Wednesday, and Defense and Housing and

Urban Development on Thursday. They'll cap off a busy week by exploring the Agriculture Department's request with a rare Friday hearing.

In the Senate, Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) is searching for a path forward on resuming extended unemployment benefits for the nation's long-term jobless. Republicans are developing their own proposal, which could lead to a compromise.

The Senate Banking Committee will try again to vet a trio of Federal Reserve nominees on Thursday, after the original confirmation hearing was postponed due to winter weather.

The biggest name on the slate is Stanley Fischer, who has been tapped to fill the No. 2 spot at the central bank left vacant by new Fed chief Janet Yellen.

Jerome Powell, who already is serving on the Fed board and seeking a full term, and Lael Brainard, a former top Treasury Department official, are both also on tap.

The Banking panel will also consider Gustavo Velázquez Aguilar to join the Department of Housing and Urban Development as an assistant secretary, and J. Mark McWatters to join the National Credit Union Administration Board.

Before getting to the nominees, the panel has to work through three subcommittee hearings. On Tuesday, they will discuss how insurers should be regulated, with a pivot later in the day to the state of retirement security for the middle class.

On Thursday, the Senate Finance Committee has scheduled a hearing on how innovative ideas could help the middle class. A number of economists and experts have been invited to testify.

The House Judiciary Committee will be discussing ways to handle sales taxes in the Internet era. The Senate passed legislation on the matter in 2013, but the House has yet to act on it.

The House Financial Services Committee will continue its yearlong review of the Fed on Wednesday, with a subcommittee hearing devoted to how the central bank has helped allocate credit across the U.S. economy.

GAO Report: Nuclear Nonproliferation: Stronger Planning and Evaluation Needed for Radiological Security Zone Pilot Project

GAO

March 6, 2014

[LINK](#)

What GAO Found

Two U.S. agencies--the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and the

National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA)--have several ongoing efforts, both in the United States and internationally, to secure radiological sources that could be used to make a terrorist weapon. These efforts include strengthening regulatory requirements, upgrading security, and recovering unwanted or abandoned radiological sources. Domestically, NRC has worked to strengthen regulatory requirements to provide reasonable assurance that U.S. licensees protect high-risk radiological sources. In addition, at the request of licensees, NNSA provides voluntary security upgrades designed to raise security to a level above existing regulatory requirements, consistent with best practices that NNSA has identified. These upgrades include, for example, motion sensors and alarms that are tracked by staff at remote monitoring centers. Internationally, NRC has spent about \$12 million since 2002 to help countries establish and strengthen their regulatory frameworks. From fiscal year 2008 through March 2013, NNSA has spent about \$304 million to help remove or secure radiological sources in foreign locations. However, NNSA officials said that applying the highest standards and best practices used for domestic security upgrades may not be feasible in some other countries, in part, because some countries do not have the reliable communication systems needed to support the most up-to-date remote monitoring systems.

In 2012, NNSA established a radiological security zone (RSZ) pilot project that seeks to establish and sustain the highest standard of physical security measures and best practices at specific sites in Mexico City and Peru, but it did not complete some important planning and evaluation steps. NNSA undertook several planning steps, including identifying the scope of project activities and developing a project schedule to track the progress of project activities, which are expected to cost about \$10 million. However, it did not engage some key stakeholders--such as NRC, the Department of State (State) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)--early on while planning its pilot project or develop a specific evaluation plan for the project. By not following the professional practice of early engagement of key stakeholders, NNSA may have missed opportunities to obtain and leverage the expertise, perspectives, and resources of these agencies. For example, if IAEA had been involved early in the RSZ pilot project, it could have shared its expertise and perspectives based on its long-standing involvement in regional radiological security collaborations. Regarding the evaluation plan, NNSA officials told GAO that they will evaluate the completed pilot project to determine whether it was sufficiently successful to merit expanding RSZ projects to other countries. However, NNSA has not developed a specific plan to evaluate the pilot project's success that includes several key features of a well-developed evaluation plan. For example, such a plan would include well-defined, clear, and measurable project objectives that would demonstrate the success of the project. Having a specific and well-developed evaluation plan could help NNSA enhance the credibility and effectiveness of future RSZ projects, if NNSA decides to continue beyond its current pilot project.

Why GAO Did This Study

U.S. and international security experts have raised concerns that certain types of radioactive material could be used to make a terrorist weapon, known as a radiological dispersal device or a "dirty bomb." Such material,

which is typically sealed in a metal capsule known as a sealed radiological source, is commonly used worldwide in medical and industrial settings. To help secure these sources, in 2012, NNSA began an RSZ pilot project in two countries.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013 mandated GAO to, among other things, assess efforts to establish RSZs. In this study, GAO (1) examined current federal efforts to secure radiological sources in the United States and in foreign countries and (2) assessed NNSA's efforts to plan for and establish an RSZ pilot project. GAO reviewed relevant regulations and guidance for securing U.S. and international radiological sources, as well as NNSA's RSZ pilot project documents; examined GAO guidance and professional practices for planning and evaluating pilot projects; interviewed officials from NNSA, NRC, State, and the Department of Homeland Security; and obtained written responses to questions from IAEA.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NNSA, if it proceeds with further work beyond its current RSZ pilot project, (1) obtain stakeholder expertise and perspectives and (2) develop a specific evaluation plan for RSZs. NNSA agreed with these recommendations.

