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Nuclear waste drums at US lab appear stable after signs of chemical reactions, officials say

US News

April 20, 2015

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — Dozens of drums of radioactive waste at one of the nation's premier weapons laboratories are stable after some showed signs of chemical reactions over the past year, according to federal officials.

The drums are being closely monitored after a chemical reaction inside a container with similar contents caused a breach in February 2014, resulting in a radiation release and the indefinite closure of the country's only underground nuclear waste dump.

Investigators with the U.S. Energy Department confirmed during a recent town hall that there have been chemical reactions in the containers stored at Los Alamos National Laboratory, but the gases building up inside have decreased over the past several months.

"That would suggest that the reaction, if it is occurring, is slowing down. It's reached a steady state, and it has stopped," said John

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Marra, chief research officer for Savannah River National Laboratory and one of the investigators who reviewed the cause of the 2014 radiation leak at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in southern New Mexico.

Monitoring of the temperature and the gases — which can include hydrogen, carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide — has provided evidence of fluctuation inside the drums remaining at Los Alamos.

"Some of it is just normal oxidation, but some of it may be at a different rate than others. Every drum is unique," said Ted Wyka, head of the Energy Department's Accident Investigation Board.

Wyka added that none of the changes has been at the same level and rate as the drum that popped its lid after being placed into storage at Waste Isolation Pilot Plant.

Still, Marra and others warned during the public meeting in Carlsbad last week that managers at the Los Alamos lab will have to consider the hazards of handling the drums as they craft a plan for permanent disposal.

Any plan would have to be approved by the New Mexico Environment Department, and the cleanup of the Cold War-era waste is a long way off given the indefinite closure of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, officials have acknowledged.

The closure has delayed cleanup of legacy waste like contaminated gloves, tools and clothing from decades of bomb-making across the federal government's nuclear complex. In its 15 years of operation, the nuclear dump received shipments from more than 20 different sites as part of the Energy Department's multibillion-dollar-a-year cleanup program.

State environment officials said Monday that Los Alamos lab has been providing biweekly updates and written reports on the status of the drums, which include several dozen containers filled with nitrate salt residues, a neutralizing agent and organic cat litter meant to absorb moisture.

Investigators say the combination of those ingredients and the way they were placed inside the drum spurred the chemical reaction that resulted in the breach at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant.

As a precaution, the remaining drums at Los Alamos were packed in protective waste boxes last May and placed in domed vaults that

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are temperature controlled and have filtration systems.

There have been no signs of concern in any of the drums, lab director Charlie McMillian told staff in a memo last week.

Nuclear Officials Report Minor Accident In Eastern Idaho

Boise State Public Radio

April 17, 2015

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Nuclear officials told a citizen's advisory board recently that a minor accident last year temporarily shut down work at a cleanup site in eastern Idaho and exposed a staffer to low levels of radiation.

Idaho Cleanup Project spokesman Mark Brown has said the accident Oct. 23 at the Idaho National Laboratory site came as workers repackaged nuclear waste.

Decontamination efforts delayed work for seven weeks, and one worker was exposed to a small amount radiation, but not enough cause health problems, Brown said April 8.

Susan Burke, of the state Environmental Quality Department, says she would have liked to have learned of the accident sooner, but officials have said it wasn't serious enough to require further reporting.

INL manager to lead troubled nuke waste dump

Local News 8

April 16, 2015

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A nuclear expert from Idaho has been named the new president and project manager of the company that oversees the federal government's troubled nuclear waste repository in southern New Mexico.

Nuclear Waste Partnership announced the change Thursday, saying Philip Breidenbach will replace Bob McQuinn next week.

McQuinn came on board in 2014 shortly after a radiation release forced the indefinite closure of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant and stalled the cleanup of Cold War-era waste at facilities around the

country.

McQuinn was among those who developed a recovery plan for WIPP and implemented corrective actions over the past year.

Breidenbach comes from the Idaho National Laboratory where he served as head of nuclear operations at the Materials and Fuels Complex. He also worked at Savannah River Site in South Carolina.

Hanford to be one of newest national parks during centennial

Tri-City Herald

April 16, 2015

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The Manhattan Project National Historical Park will be one of the nation's newest parks as the National Park Service celebrates its 100th birthday next year.

Even if the national park's signature arrowhead — the emblem used at all the nation's parks — has not gone up at Hanford yet, the results of the celebration should last well into the future, Peggy O'Dell, the deputy director of operations for the National Park Service, said in Richland on Thursday.

National Park Service officials, along with Department of Energy officials from Washington, D.C., are in the Tri-Cities this week to visit historic areas of Hanford and to work on an agreement for the roles and responsibilities of each federal agency in the new park.

In December, national legislation created the new park, which includes historic areas at Hanford, Oak Ridge, Tenn., and Los Alamos, N.M., that played roles in the Manhattan Project race to produce the world's first nuclear weapon during World War II.

Hanford produced plutonium for the world's first atomic explosion in the New Mexico desert and the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, helping end the war.

The park service's goal as it starts its second century is to "attract new audiences to national parks and to help people understand that National Parks are more than Yosemite and Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon," O'Dell said.

At Hanford, the new park would focus on history rather than the

nation's natural wonders. B Reactor, the world's first full-scale nuclear reactor, will be included and other historic areas may also be within the park's boundaries.

The remaining buildings of the small communities and farms taken over by the federal government for the secret wartime project and T Plant, which removed plutonium from irradiated uranium fuel, are being considered for inclusion.

The centennial celebration will be inviting a new generation of Americans to not only visit national parks, but also to get involved.

It is planned to be a springboard to increase support for the park service, attracting more volunteers and building its philanthropy program with new tools being developed for local and national endowments.

"The volunteer support here in the Tri-Cities is amazing for the Manhattan Project National Park and B Reactor," said Vic Knox, the park service associate director for park planning, facilities and lands.

"We are off to a great start and are looking forward to what's to come," he said.

DOE and the park service are expected to have their joint agreement worked out by the end of the year, just as the park service centennial year starts. Once the initial planning is completed, the park service can apply to Congress for funding.

Editorial Board: A plan to deal with nuclear waste

The Washington Post

April 17, 2015

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THE NATION'S nuclear waste strategy is — well, actually, the nation doesn't have much of a nuclear waste strategy. Nearly 30 years ago, Congress deemed Yucca Mountain, Nev., to be the site of a permanent geological depository for the thousands of tons of spent fuel and other radioactive wastes produced in nuclear power stations and other industrial facilities. Since then, intense politicking has undercut that plan, still at best many years away from realization. Meantime, the waste keeps piling up, stored next to operating and decommissioned nuclear power plants.

A bipartisan Senate bill, introduced last month by Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.), Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), proposes to bring a little more order to the mess. Still to be resolved, however, is what to do about Yucca Mountain.

Instead of solving the Yucca issue, the bill's sponsors decided to focus on building every other storage site the country needs, reflecting the reality that the nation requires a more orderly transition from the haphazard waste storage system in place now to permanent storage, whenever that's finally ready.

Taking their cue from the solid work of a presidential blue-ribbon commission, the bill foresees the quick building of a pilot waste storage site that would take radioactive material on an interim basis. After that, the government would accept applications from localities seeking the economic benefits of hosting additional interim storage sites. The idea is to get waste off reactor sites, consolidate it and make storage safer and cheaper than it is now. Then regulators could consider long-term options. All new siting decisions would require the consent of local communities and state leaders, heading off Yucca Mountain-style political gridlock.

The bill would also create an agency charged exclusively with handling nuclear waste. Crucially, it would have an assured source of funding, rather than relying on yearly appropriations. This all makes a lot of sense.

One reason the bill has a good shot at becoming law is that both Yucca fans and critics can accept that the country needs safe new storage sites and a logical process for identifying them, regardless of how the Nevada project goes. The waste needs to get off reactor sites now, and even if Yucca goes forward, it wouldn't be big enough to store all the country's waste. The bill deserves to pass.

It's crucial, though, that interim storage sites not become permanent ones. The best way to head that off is to proceed with Yucca Mountain. President Obama zeroed out funding for Yucca in his first term, making good on a campaign promise to swing-state Nevada. But the project isn't dead. In fact, Yucca proponents contend, that there's no need for debate about the site: Existing law clearly designates Yucca as a permanent repository. Besides, a thorough analysis from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission recently found that the project would pose minimal radiation risk for a million years, and Nevada's leaders aren't as unified in opposition as many assume. Though the other side doesn't have

common sense behind it, it does have powerful political allies who have hobbled the project. They need to back down or be defeated.

Congress should pass the nuclear waste bill. Then it should see to moving the Yucca project forward.

