

ECA Update

January 22, 2016

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Some operations at the federal government’s troubled nuclear waste repository in southern New Mexico could resume by the end of 2016 under a plan approved by U.S. Department of Energy officials, but critics voiced concerns Thursday about whether the facility would be ready to safely reopen.

The plan approved by the DOE’s field office in Carlsbad, New Mexico, addresses recovery activities at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, day-to-day operations and maintenance as well as the installation of a ventilation system needed before the underground facility resumes work related to the long-term storage of radioactive waste.

DOE officials said Thursday it could be a couple of weeks before the plan’s details are made public. They have yet to brief regulators and members of Congress.

“The goal is to resume waste emplacement operations. Volumes and all that have yet to be determined,” said Bill Taylor, a spokesman with the field office.

The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant has been closed since February 2014, when a container of waste inside one of the repository’s storage vaults burst and released radiation that contaminated parts of the underground facility. Investigators determined the container from Los Alamos National Laboratory was packed with incompatible ingredients that resulted in a chemical reaction.

Aside from forcing WIPP's indefinite closure, the incident spurred the state to levy record fines against the federal government and its contractors and delayed the 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 repository received shipments from more than 20 sites as part of the DOE's multibillion-dollar-a-year cleanup program.

The repository was initially slated to reopen in March 2016. Last summer, however, the DOE said safety concerns and equipment setbacks were delaying the opening.

Don Hancock with the Albuquerque-based watchdog group Southwest Research and Information Center argued that the repository's reopening is driven by a schedule rather than safety. He said the timetable in the new plan is no more realistic than the DOE's original estimate of opening in March.

"The facility is seriously behind schedule and millions of dollars over budget and is not ready to safely re-open," he said.

The plan approved by the field office would clear the way for waste already at the repository to be entombed in underground storage vaults mined out of deep salt formations.

Taylor acknowledged there would be more regulatory hurdles before the repository could resume receiving shipments of waste from other locations.