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Settlement over WIPP and LANL violations finalized

ABQ Journal

January 22, 2016

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The New Mexico Environment Department said Friday that it has finalized a landmark \$74 million settlement resolving violations connected with a 2014 radiological release at the nuclear waste repository near Carlsbad.

Agreements resolving permit violations at Los Alamos National Laboratory and the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant repository were struck in April last year, but it has taken months to hammer out the details.

Environment Secretary Ryan Flynn said the settlement was signed by all parties late Thursday and early Friday.

“LANL and WIPP are critical assets to our nation’s security, our state’s economy and the communities in which they operate,” Gov. Susana Martinez said in a statement. “The funds New Mexico will receive through this agreement will help ensure the future safety and success of these facilities, the people who work at them, and their local communities.”

In December 2014, the Environment Department levied the state’s largest-ever fines against the federal government – \$54 million – after an improperly packed drum of LANL waste ruptured underground at WIPP. LANL had combined nitrate salts and a type of organic kitty litter in a drum that caused a hot reaction, bursting the lid.

The February 2014 accident released small amounts of radiation into the environment and contaminated nearly two dozen workers.

The higher-dollar settlement is designed to resolve past and potential future violations related to the release. The money is earmarked to fund road, water and emergency management projects around the state, with most of the resources focused on Los Alamos and Carlsbad.

Projects include:

\$34 million to improve roads in southeastern New Mexico.

\$12 million to improve roads around Los Alamos, especially those used to transport nuclear waste to WIPP.

\$20 million to repair water infrastructure in Los Alamos, including upgrading the public drinking water system and improving regional water quality.

\$3 million to pay for a safety and compliance audit of WIPP every third year.

\$4 million to construct an emergency operations center in Carlsbad, which DOE has already completed.

In a statement, U.S. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz called the projects “important investments in the health and safety of New Mexicans who work at or live nearby DOE facilities” and said they “will enhance our operations.”

The infrastructure projects are slated to be completed within two years, Flynn said.

“A large portion of this money is coming from the performance bonus that was withheld from (contractor) Los Alamos National Security last year,” Flynn said. The rest has come from other sources that are not included in operational or environmental clean up budgets at LANL or WIPP. We’re not just shifting money from one of our pots to the settlement.”

The settlement also reiterates numerous corrective actions that LANL and WIPP must complete to resolve permit violations.

Finalizing the settlement is key to allowing WIPP to reopen, Flynn said. DOE has said it hopes to restart some waste emplacement operations at WIPP this year.

Savannah River Nuclear Solutions to hire 2,000 workers through Aiken Tech partnership

Aiken Standard

January 22, 2016

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About 2,000 new employees will be hired by Savannah River Nuclear Solutions, or SRNS, through a partnership with Aiken Technical College, the SRS contractor announced Friday.

According to a press release, students enrolling in Aiken Tech's Nuclear Fundamentals Certificate program can receive up to \$2,000 in grant funds per semester. For Aiken County residents, tuition per semester for the Nuclear Fundamentals Certificate program is about \$2,100.

The program blends applied chemistry, physics and engineering classes and provides a foundation for employment in today's modern nuclear facilities, according to the Aiken Tech website.

The program requires two semesters of course work to complete and is a collaborative effort between the college and the contractor.

"We have plans to hire 80 general production workers that we call 'operators' this year alone," said Carol Johnson, president and CEO of SRNS. "Aiken Technical College has created a new program whose graduates will have met all our fundamental training needs, providing much needed job candidates who are ready to go to work in our nuclear facilities almost immediately."

SRNS added that newly hired operators who have earned the Nuclear Fundamentals Certificate can expect starting pay to be approximately \$41,000 a year. The contractor expects to hire as many as 2,000 qualified general production operators, radiation control personnel and mechanics at SRS over the next several years.

Johnson added that the effort is due to the expected retirement for a large percentage of the SRNS workforce. Reports from last year concluded that at least 50 percent of the workforce will be eligible for retirement in the coming years.

Aiken Tech President Dr. Susan Winsor added that each graduate with the certificate in hand will find multiple employers in the nuclear field, locally, regionally and nationally.

“We’ve been in contact with several large corporations in this field, and they are all in need of qualified nuclear workers,” Winsor said. “We want ATC to be the college that educates, equips and provides those job candidates.”

Savannah River Nuclear Solutions is the management and operations contractor for the Savannah River Site.

Scuttlebiz: U.S. Rep. Rick Allen stands by decision to finish MOX facility

Augusta Chronicle

January 22, 2016

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The Obama administration seems determined to convince everyone that the plutonium disposition project under construction at Savannah River Site is too costly to finish.

But U.S. Rep. Rick Allen, who knows a thing or two about construction, believes the facility would be too costly to not finish.

He told reporters last week at the conclusion of a fact-finding tour at SRS that halting the project better known as MOX could cost \$500 million, or about one-sixth of the amount the project contractor says is needed to complete the 70 percent completed facility.

I tend to believe that if Allen used such a figure, which he said came from MOX contractor CB&I, he must believe it’s true. As I said, Allen knows construction – it’s something he spent his entire life doing before going off to Washington’s shark tank.

It's pretty clear last Tuesday's tour of the Mixed Oxide Fuel Fabrication Facility was designed to convince Allen and a few other congressmen that the project, which employs more than 1,000 area workers, is a boondoggle that should be scrapped and its \$340 million-a-year budget reallocated.

Apparently the functionaries at the Department of Energy and the National Nuclear Safety Administration weren't very convincing.

Allen doesn't appear convinced that just walking away from a 600,000-square-foot nuclear facility the government already has sunk \$3 billion into is a good idea.

Guess this old contractor knows a hatchet job when he sees it.

Plan calls for operations to resume at nuclear dump this year

AP: Lubbock Avalanche Journal

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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.