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Process Improvements at AMWTP Will Lead to Safer, Less Expensive Processing of Radioactive Waste at DOE's Idaho Site

Approximately 20,000 drums currently stored at the Department of Energy's Idaho site will feel the crushing weight of a decision by the Carlsbad Field Office (CBFO) that will send them to the Idaho site's Supercompactor, located at the Advanced Mixed Waste Treatment Project (AMWTP).

In a memorandum dated April 12, 2013, the Carlsbad Field Office expanded its certification of the AMWTP's contact-handled transuranic waste that will allow AMWTP to use the Supercompactor to treat 55-gallon drums through the compaction process that contain small intact inner containers with limited liquids. The acceptance from CBFO comes after Idaho's Department of Environmental Quality approved this treatment approach. Final approval was given on Feb. 13, 2013.

"The collaborative and cooperative relationship between DOE-ID and CBFO led to this process improvement to allow these items, such as aerosol cans, sealed containers and liquids to be safely and compliantly compacted," said Jim Cooper, Deputy Manager of Environmental Management for DOE's Idaho Operations Office. "From an employee's standpoint, this minimizes exposure to the workers and allows them to process the waste drums remotely. From the tax payer's viewpoint, it's going to mean more drums being safely treated for less cost."

The estimated savings created by treating the drums in the Supercompactor could total in millions of dollars in savings.

The Supercompactor is the focal point of AMWTP's production prowess. By exerting 2,000 tons - 4 million pounds - of force, the Supercompactor can reduce a 55-gallon drum to roughly one-fifth its original size. By compacting waste, AMWTP employees reduce the number of shipments going to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant that is managed by CBFO, and make maximum use of the currently available disposal space in WIPP.

AMWTP was built to treat and ship transuranic waste, nearly all of which had been shipped to Idaho in the 1970's and early '80s from the Department's now closed Rocky Flats nuclear weapon component manufacturing plant, located near Denver. Transuranic waste is waste contaminated with a radioactive element past uranium on the periodic table of elements and at AMWTP, the primary transuranic contaminant is plutonium.

"We're extremely pleased with the Department's announcement," said Idaho Treatment Group President and Project Manager Danny Nichols. ITG operates AMWTP for DOE. "This decision will help us work safe and expeditiously treat drums and prepare them for shipment out of Idaho in full compliance with the Idaho Settlement Agreement."

"Having safely and compliantly completed more than 187,000 compactions of drums over the past eight years, both the Carlsbad Field Office and the Idaho Operations Office have a high degree of confidence in AMWTP's processes and its workforce," Cooper said. "The collegial working arrangements between the states of Idaho and New Mexico and our two field offices enabled us to make these changes. DOE considers AMWTP to be a regional waste processing facility capable of safely and compliantly receiving and treating waste from other DOE sites, consistent with the terms contained in the Idaho Settlement Agreement."

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