



Media Contacts:
Danielle Miller, 208-526-5709
Brad Bugger, 208-526-0833

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Nevada Waste Leaves Idaho Facility

(Note: This is a reissue of a press release originally sent last week to ensure all intended recipients receive a copy after technical glitch may have kept it from reaching some of them)

It may have looked like just another shipment of transuranic radioactive waste leaving Idaho, but the shipment heading south on U.S. Interstate 15 the afternoon of January 26 actually contained waste from another DOE site in Nevada. The shipment demonstrated the capacity of the U.S. Department of Energy's Advanced Mixed Waste Treatment Project to be a hub where the Department's transuranic radioactive waste can be safely and compliantly treated before permanent disposal in DOE's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, located near Carlsbad, New Mexico.

Between December 2008 and July 2009 some 160 cubic meters of transuranic waste, consisting of radioactively contaminated sludge and debris, came to Idaho from the Department's Nevada Test Site. The intrastate shipment was required because the Department's facilities in Nevada did not have the means to certify the waste for direct shipment to WIPP. Building the necessary processing capability at the Nevada Test Site would have been very costly for taxpayers.

Facilities at AMWTP and the Central Characterization Project (CCP), an independent transuranic radioactive waste characterization operation, teamed up to characterize and validate the waste from Nevada. AMWTP and CCP currently possess the necessary regulatory approved capabilities to characterize and process the waste in accordance with state and federal agreements.

Bringing in off-site waste to AMWTP is part of the Department's regional waste processing plan and the experience with the NTS waste helps to validate that concept. "From the perspective of the DOE Idaho Operations office, we have been pleased at how the Nevada waste was received, processed and shipped. This is an important and successful step in the Department's regional strategy for safely handling the nation's radioactive waste," said DOE Idaho Operations Office Deputy Manager Rick Provencher.

In order for off-site transuranic waste to come into the state, it must meet the terms of the Settlement Agreement, a legally binding document among DOE, the U.S. Navy, and the state of Idaho. Processing waste from sites outside of Idaho is allowed but strictly regulated in accordance with requirements under the INL Site Treatment Plan. The radioactive waste must be treated within six months of arriving and has to be shipped out of the state within six months following treatment. The process is closely monitored by representatives of the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality.

Personnel at DOE Headquarters, the Carlsbad Field Office that oversees WIPP and CCP, and the Idaho Operations site collaborated to create a plan that met the stringent regulatory processes governing the disposal of the nation's transuranic waste. "The most important goal we've accomplished is demonstrating our process to safely and economically treat this waste and ensure it meets the waste acceptance criteria of our nation's only transuranic waste repository at WIPP," Provencher said.

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By Brad Bugger