

Elizabeth Sellers, manager of the Department of Energy's Idaho Operations Office, responded recently to concerns raised about DOE's plans to ship transuranic waste to Idaho for treatment prior to disposal in New Mexico. Following is Ms. Sellers' response.



Elizabeth Sellers

In a recent editorial, "Nuclear plans put community at risk (JH N&G, April 30, 2008)," Mary Woolen raised concerns about the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE's) decision to use existing waste treatment facilities at its Idaho Site to treat waste from other DOE sites prior to shipment to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in New Mexico for final disposal. In fact, the Idaho site is the most advanced site in the nation for safely treating and disposing of this Cold War era nuclear waste and, as the central Transuranic Waste preparation site, prevents duplicative characterization and avoids significant cost to the American taxpayer associated with establishing similar facilities at sites across the country.

DOE's top priority is to ensure human health and safety when transporting nuclear waste materials and significant precautions are taken with Transuranic Waste shipments: The U.S. Department of Transportation requires that shipments of Transuranic Waste be marked, labeled, and placarded, while the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission requires that transport packaging be designed to prevent the release of waste in the event of an accident. When the shipments are on their way, they are tracked by satellite. DOE also works closely with state emergency management and law enforcement agencies to ensure they are aware when the materials are undergoing transport and provides planning, training, and technical assistance for jurisdictions along the transportation corridors to assist them in preparedness. As a result, there has never been a single release of radiological material from one of these shipments.

The Idaho site is well-equipped to treat additional quantities of waste from other DOE sites, having successfully and safely treated and packaged over 22,000 cubic meters of transuranic waste at its facilities. No other site in the DOE Complex has shipped as much waste to WIPP--more than 19,000 cubic meters have been sent out of Idaho during the past three years and placed in permanent disposal, reducing the potential risk to human health and the environment.



Over 22,000 cubic meters of transuranic waste have been safely treated and shipped from Idaho to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico for permanent disposal.

The waste will be treated by sorting, removing prohibited items, and shredding and compacting the waste. DOE will not incinerate any of this waste. The heart of Idaho's capabilities is the Advanced Mixed Waste Treatment Facility (AMWTF) - a 62-ton supercompactor, which will process an estimated 70 percent of the 65,000 cubic meters of transuranic waste stored in Idaho. The Supercompactor can compact a 55-gallon drum of waste to roughly one-fifth its original size, which greatly reduces the number of waste shipments necessary and reduces the volume of waste that must be disposed.

DOE's current action plan calls for treating less than ten percent of the amount of off-site waste that DOE originally assessed in an Environmental Impact Statement. Utilizing the Department's Idaho facilities, including the AMWTF, to treat waste from across the DOE complex, will allow us to dispose of these small quantities of waste from other generator sites, bringing us closer to our goal of safely cleaning up these sites quickly and in a cost-effective manner.

Prior to accepting Transuranic Waste from other DOE facilities for treatment, Idaho staff will work with the staff at WIPP, and with the generators of the waste in order to understand the waste's origin, and what treatment is required to make the waste safe for disposal at WIPP. In addition, DOE's Idaho Site and WIPP will obtain the state of Idaho's approval before any new waste can come to Idaho for treatment in accordance with the 1995 Idaho Settlement Agreement and the Site Treatment Plan. DOE also will develop a schedule that identifies when the waste will arrive at the Idaho Site, when the waste will be treated, and when it will depart the site, as well as provide a periodic update on the status of waste processing against the agreed upon schedule.

The quarterly report published by S.M. Stoller Corporation (<http://www.stoller-eser.com/Publications.htm#Quarterly>), which looks at the environmental emissions from DOE's Idaho Site, concludes that, "All detected (radionuclide) concentrations were well below guidelines set by the U.S. Department of Energy and regulatory standards established by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for protection of the public."

In other words, all radioactive emissions from all activities at DOE's Idaho Site are well below health and safety standards – including the ongoing retrieval, characterization, treatment, packaging and, ultimately, transportation of transuranic waste stored at the Idaho site.

Don't take DOE or Stoller's word for it, though. Go to the State of Idaho's INL Oversight Program web site and look at the state's quarterly monitoring data -- (http://www.deq.idaho.gov/inl_oversight/library.cfm#quarterly). Again, you'll find that radioactive emissions from the site are well below established health and safety guidelines.

In summary, DOE's Idaho site's experienced people, advanced treatment facilities, and consistent track record uniquely position it to carry out this important national mission safely and efficiently.

Elizabeth Sellers is the Manager of the U.S. Department of Energy's Idaho Operations Office.