

13 were exposed to radiation at US plant

February 27 2014, by Jeri Clausing

(AP)—Thirteen workers at a U.S. underground nuclear waste dump in New Mexico have tested positive for radiation exposure after a recent leak, raising questions about whether the facility's safety systems worked as well as officials have said.

The accident is the first-known release of radiation since the dump began taking plutonium-contaminated waste from U.S. nuclear bomb building sites 15 years ago

The U.S. Department of Energy and the contractor that runs the Waste Isolation Pilot Project declined to comment further on the preliminary test results announced Wednesday, saying they'll discuss the issue at a news conference Thursday afternoon.

"It is important to note that these are initial sample results," the DOE and Nuclear Waste Partnership, the plant operator, said in a joint statement.

All employees who were working at the plant when the leak occurred late Feb. 14 were checked for contamination before being allowed to leave, the news release said. But biological samples were also taken to check for possible exposure from inhaling radioactive particles.

Elevated radiation levels have been detected in the air around the plant, but officials have said the readings are too low to constitute a public health threat.

And they have said that all indications are that a HEPA filtration system

designed to immediately kick in when radiation is detected and keep 99.7 percent of contamination from being released above ground worked flawlessly.

But watchdog Don Hancock, director of the Nuclear Waste Safety program at the Southwest Research and Information Center, said the fact that the workers were exposed raises questions about those claims.

"The WIPP systems right now are in the guinea pig stage," he said. "We know in theory what they were designed to do but we don't know how well they worked because they have never been tried."

Officials said they can tell from their analyses of air samples in and around the plant that a container of waste leaked, but it could be weeks before they can get underground to find out what caused it. Possible scenarios include a ceiling collapse or a forklift puncturing a canister, Farok Sharif, president of the Nuclear Waste Partnership, said Monday before a community meeting in Carlsbad.

The leak came just nine days after a truck hauling salt in the plant's deep mines caught fire, but officials say they are confident the incidents are unrelated.

WIPP is the first deep underground nuclear repository in the U.S. and the only facility in the country that can store plutonium-contaminated clothing and tools from Los Alamos National Laboratory and other federal nuclear sites.

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