

# DOE says video points to single drum breach at NM nuke dump

February 13 2015, by Susan Montoya Bryan

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New video appears to confirm that the radiation leak at the federal government's underground nuclear waste dump was limited to a single drum of waste, a U.S. Energy Department official said Thursday.

Joe Franco, head of the DOE's Carlsbad field office, said in a conference call with reporters that a final report has yet to be issued on the mishap at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in southern New Mexico, but thanks to a special camera boom, investigators were able to get a good look between and across the stacks of waste where the drum ruptured.

"That allowed them to obtain a full view of visual evidence needed to make that determination," Franco said.

Once the investigation into the cause of the leak is complete, the full focus can shift to reopening the facility, he said.

The repository has been closed since February 2014, when the container of waste from Los Alamos National Laboratory ruptured and contaminated 22 workers along with parts of the underground facility. While the DOE is targeting 2016 for some operations to resume, it could take at least another three years and cost more than a half billion dollars to fully reopen the site.

Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz, testifying Thursday before a congressional committee, said the timetable "remains a little bit

uncertain." He said the key to full operations will be a new ventilation system that could cost anywhere from \$100 million to \$300 million.

Crews have made more than 200 trips underground since the leak occurred. Donning protective suits, they have been busy surveying for contamination, checking fire suppression and other equipment and installing long metal bolts into the ceiling and walls of the half-mile-deep salt caverns to ensure stability.

While nearly two-thirds of the underground space is free of [radioactive contamination](#), Franco acknowledged more work needs to be done to survey and analyze the areas that are contaminated.

"We know where the contamination starts, but the extent of contamination, how much contamination is in certain areas, hasn't been quantified," he said.

Don Hancock, of the Southwest Research and Information Center watchdog group in Albuquerque, has been pushing DOE and WIPP officials to release more information about the contamination levels underground.

"They like to talk about the 6 miles of tunnels that are not contaminated and not the almost 2 miles that are contaminated," he said.

Franco said the decontamination process has started and will continue as the rock bolting progresses. That process includes spraying water on the ceiling and walls to trap the contamination inside the salt. In other areas, crews plan to cover the contamination with salt mined from another area of the facility and layers of paint.

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