

Los Alamos radiation release could have been prevented (Update)

April 16 2015, by Susan Montoya Bryan

A radiation leak that forced the indefinite closure of the federal government's only underground nuclear waste repository could have been prevented, a team of investigators said Thursday.

A combination of poor management, lapses in safety and a lack of proper procedures were outlined in a final report released by the U.S. Department of Energy's Accident Investigation Board. Officials planned to review the findings Thursday night during a community meeting in Carlsbad.

The investigators spent more than a year looking into the cause of the radiation release at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in southeastern New Mexico.

Like a separate team of technical experts, they too found that a chemical reaction inside a drum of waste that had been packaged at Los Alamos National Laboratory forced the lid open, allowing radiation to escape. The contents included nitrate salt residues and organic cat litter that was used to soak up moisture in the waste.

Aside from lab managers, the report places blame on DOE headquarters, the National Nuclear Security Administration and the Nuclear Waste Partnership, the contractor that manages the repository. It highlights numerous failures—from Los Alamos lab not having an adequate system for identifying and controlling hazards to federal nuclear officials not ensuring the existence of a "strong safety culture" at the lab.

Investigators found a failure by managers to resolve employee concerns that could have pointed out problems before the waste was shipped from Los Alamos to the repository.

Lab Director Charlie McMillian acknowledged in a staff memo obtained by The Associated Press that investigators pointed out "serious deficiencies" in the lab's processes and procedures.

"We now know from the investigations that if (Los Alamos National Laboratory) had followed certain basic steps, this event would not have happened. Also, if we had complied with our hazardous waste permit, we would have avoided the serious legal and credibility issues we now face," McMillian wrote.

The Energy Department and its contractors are facing \$54 million in fines from the state of New Mexico for the failures that led to the mishap. Negotiations are ongoing, and the state has suggested more financial fallout is possible.

With the repository closed indefinitely, efforts to clean up decades of Cold War-era waste at federal facilities around the country are stalled. Federal officials say resuming full operations at the repository could take years and cost more than a half-billion dollars.

David Klaus, DOE's deputy secretary for management and performance, said the agency is working on corrective actions to ensure greater oversight of the disposal of radioactive waste.

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