

# Feds: No 'show-stoppers' found in nuke readiness review

December 16 2016, by Susan Montoya Bryan

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U.S. Energy Department officials said Thursday no "show-stoppers" were found during an intensive review of whether the federal government's nuclear waste repository in southern New Mexico is ready to reopen following a radiation leak.

Officials outlined the findings of the recent review during a public forum and reiterated their intended goal of resuming limited operations at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant by the end of the month.

Some in audience expressed skepticism after hearing the laundry list of issues that the Energy Department and the manager of the underground facility need to address before reopening.

Those 21 findings range from simple paperwork and documentation issues to procedural inadequacies that involve new requirements for accepting waste from national laboratories and other defense sites around the country. Another 15 findings have been identified that can be addressed over time as operations resume, such as an aging public announcement system that warns workers of emergencies.

It's been nearly three years since workers at the repository have handled any containers of waste. That's because a chemical reaction inside an inappropriately packed container resulted in a radiation release and forced the facility's indefinite closure.

Investigators determined the mishap would have been preventable had

policies and procedures been followed. The repository and Los Alamos National Laboratory, where the container was packed, were cited for numerous violations by state regulators.

Officials have yet to publicly release the readiness report, but they said corrective action plans have been developed for all of the findings and that six of the issues have already been taken care of.

"Again, safety is a priority and doing it right is a priority for us," said Todd Shrader, head of the Energy Department's field office in Carlsbad, New Mexico. "If it takes a little bit beyond that then we will take the time, but our goal does still remain December and we are at the last steps of the readiness process."

Watchdog groups have been critical of the Energy Department, saying the agency shouldn't rush given the critical role the facility plays in the nation's multibillion-dollar cleanup program and the implications if something were to go wrong again.

"The circumstances surrounding reopening WIPP need to be considered fully by the public prior to the reopening," the groups Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety and Citizen Action New Mexico wrote in a recent letter to agency officials.

Shrader said Thursday the recovery process at the repository has cost around a quarter-billion dollars and the price tag will grow by just as much when a new ventilation system is installed.

Once the findings are addressed and state and [federal officials](#) sign off, the repository plans to move waste already at the site into the first of five disposal rooms carved a thick layer of salt deep underground. Officials expect it will take between 2 and 3 years to fill up the space.

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