

Our View: ‘Dump’ Still Not the Right Word

We’ve all relied heavily on media coverage of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant’s February fire and radiological incidents. We hope that everyone receives all available information regarding what happened, why, and the condition of the workers. We sincerely appreciate the assistance with transparency provided by responsible members of the media.

As a valuable source of information for the public, the words the media uses in its coverage are very important. So while this might seem like a minor quibble, we would suggest that The Associated Press and other media outlets refrain from calling WIPP a “dump.”

WIPP is one of the most sophisticated engineering projects in the world, and it is the product of decades of scientific research. These facts are not changed by the February incidents.

Traditionally, “dump” has been used to describe an above-ground landfill, which WIPP is not. A city landfill and an underground nuclear waste repository are not the same thing, and it is misleading to use words that imply that they are. In fact, we no longer typically even use “dump” to describe “landfill” because that is also not accurate.

Additionally, it is our hope that all media outlets would report objectively and avoid spin

of any sort – positive or negative. “Dump” is a loaded word, with very negative connotations. Everyone knows what it means when someone says, “What a dump.” Whether a reporter intends it or not, use of the term indicates a negative opinion about the project.

We understand that especially with headline limitations and deadline pressures, once a term is used, it is easy to repeat it in successive stories, but we hope that the media would seek alternatives for future coverage, such as an “underground nuclear waste facility,” or “repository.”

Science Time



Above: Fran Williams, URS Technical Advisor, and Carlsbad Environmental Monitoring and Research Center Director Russell Hardy both performed experiments during the March 20 WIPP town hall meeting. The experiments were designed to explain radiation to the audience of about 60 people.

Another meeting is scheduled for this week. Videos are available at new.livestream.com/rrv/



WIPP Budget Request Update

The Department of Energy has released its FY 2015 Congressional Budget Request for the Office of Environmental Management, which manages WIPP.

According to the summary, the President has requested a budget of \$220 million for WIPP, including the security contract. WIPP has the authority to make adjustments as needed to focus on the recovery process.

“Once again, our Senators, Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich, have led the fight in support of WIPP receiving a sufficient budget and needed infrastructure funding,” said Carlsbad Mayor Dale Janway. “I sincerely appreciate their assistance.”

In 2014, Udall, as a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, was able to engineer an increase in the WIPP budget from \$203 million to \$221 million, and much of this difference was for infrastructure improvements.

“Senator Udall has also advocated on behalf of WIPP’s deferred maintenance needs for FY 2015,” Janway added.

Senators Udall and Heinrich have also encouraged the Environmental Protection Agency to deploy mobile environmental monitoring to WIPP. The senators asked the EPA to send the additional air monitors to conduct independent tests to help respond to questions that have arisen from the community.

The EPA has agreed to provide the air monitors.

Our View: State’s Freeze of PMR the Right Call

New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Ryan Flynn and his staff made a reasonable decision when the organization decided, on March 21, to withdraw the Class 3 draft Hazardous Waste Facility Permit modification request.

The decision, according to the NMED, was made in light of the Feb. 5 fire in the underground and the Feb. 14 radioactive material release.

“NMED cannot move forward on the WIPP’s request to open additional underground storage panels and for the other requested permit modifications until more information is known about the recent events at the WIPP,” said Environment Secretary Ryan Flynn in a press release. “Just as NMED needs more information to make informed decisions on permit modifications, the public also needs more information about the radiation release in order to provide informed input during the public comment period. Once NMED has all of our questions answered, we will proceed with consideration of a revised draft Permit.”

Contrary to reports from some media outlets, the permit has nothing to do with expansion – at least not in terms of the volume of waste or type of waste that can go to WIPP. The requested modification included three components: 1. Modifications to the WIPP panel closure process; 2. Repository reconfiguration of panels 9 and 10;

and 3. Making revisions to the volatile organic compounds (VOC) target analyte list and other changes to the VOC monitoring program.

The repository configuration component is arguably what has some media outlets proclaiming that the PMR is related to expansion – the modification request suggests that rather than using the main drift for panels 9 and 10, as approved in the current permit, panels 9 and 10 should be located on the south end of the mine in a fashion similar to WIPP’s other panels.

Also, despite the efforts of some vocal conspiracy theorists, there is zero connection between the permit process up to this point and the February fire and radiological incident at WIPP.

In fact, the DOE first filed this permit modification request on March 18, 2013, after conducting pre-scoping meetings with stakeholders in northern and southern New Mexico. This began a 60-day comment period. The NMED issued a technical incompleteness determination on September 20, 2013, basically requesting some additional information for the PMR. The DOE submitted a response on Oct. 29, 2013, addressing the NMED’s issues.

After reviewing the DOE’s additional information, the state published the draft permit on Feb. 14, 2014, which began a second 60-day comment period for the Class 3 PMR. This information is available at the state’s web page

at www.nmenv.state.nm.us.

WIPP manages wastes that are regulated under the federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) and the New Mexico Hazardous Waste Act. NMED is charged with issuing a permit that will ensure that WIPP’s hazardous waste operations are managed in a manner protective of human health and the environment.

“While we do not believe these two incidents are at all related directly to the proposed modifications, the reality is that the public may be wary about commenting about proposed changes to the WIPP underground while an investigation is ongoing,” said John Heaton, chair of the Carlsbad Mayor’s Nuclear Task Force. “Secretary Flynn and the State of New Mexico are right to put this permit modification on hold until a technical report explaining the cause of this radiological release has been completed.”

The NMED may issue a revised draft when it views doing so to be appropriate.

“One of this permit modification’s requests is for a new panel closure design,” Heaton noted. “I believe this proposal is a robust and achievable way of handling unclosed panels, and should be considered now on an experimental basis to protect WIPP’s workers.”