

Moniz Visit: Looking Back

Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz's August visit to Carlsbad and the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant was a positive development for a wide variety of reasons. Most specifically, the Department of Energy's core message that the Carlsbad community and WIPP are treasured was the right statement to make, and by the right person. The visit was well received by Carlsbad residents, who stated that they look forward to another visit by the Secretary when the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant is back open for business.

As a reminder, here are some of the messages members of this community wanted to deliver to WIPP during his visit here, along with updates:

We believe in WIPP. WIPP's process of disposing transuranic (TRU) radioactive waste in salt beds is the right way to safely and permanently isolate this material. WIPP remains the best solution to the nation's nuclear waste issue. WIPP requires sufficient funding to make sure the recovery process is handled properly - even if a continuing resolution is in place.

Don't abandon the future. Many projects associated with WIPP or at WIPP were put on hold as a result of this recovery process. The generic thermal testing planned for the WIPP underground is critical to expanding the world's understanding of heat and salt. Additionally, we

Please see MONIZ on the next page



Above: Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz speaks at a public forum held in Carlsbad in August. The focus of Moniz's presentation was the high emphasis the DOE places on WIPP and Carlsbad, New Mexico.



Left: Senator Tom Udall greets members of the community at the Carlsbad Municipal Airport prior to the visit. Senator Martin Heinrich, Congressman Steve Pearce and NMED Secretary Ryan Flynn also attended the event.

LANL Waste Management Move the Right Decision

We believe the Department of Energy's decision to take the environmental cleanup effort at Los Alamos National Laboratory away from the National Nuclear Security Administration and move it to the Office of Environmental Management is an excellent development. Congratulations to Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz on a wise decision that many of us have been suggesting since 1998. Additionally, we hope that this shift will significantly improve LANL's ability to communicate effectively with the state and the public about its role in the February radiological incident at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP).

So far, LANL's public outreach related to the incident has been both speculative and minimal - a dangerous combination given that the media and public are hungry for any information on the subject. LANL also plays two roles in the incident - the drum thought to be responsible for the incident came from the site and LANL is heavily involved in the Technical Assistance Team (TAT) attempting to replicate the incident.

On September 16, Terry Wallace, Principal Associate Director for Global Security with LANL, told the state's Radioactive and Hazardous Materials Committee that a drum in Panel 6 of WIPP has many of the same

Move Will Hopefully Improve Communications

characteristics as the Panel 7 drum that is likely to blame for the February incident.

At the previous Radioactive and Hazardous Materials Committee meeting, LANL's Dr. Nan Sauer told the committee that the presence of metals in a glovebox glove used in the processing of nuclear materials at LANL is under investigation as a possible contributing cause. Anti nuclear web pages and media outlets had a field day with Dr. Sauer's PowerPoint presentation, which includes a slide listing arson and sabotage under the "broader issues" category.

Following media coverage of these two committee meetings, most of the questions asked during the subsequent WIPP town hall meeting were related directly to the two Los Alamos presentations- questions that it would be unreasonable to expect employees with the Nuclear Waste Partnership or Department of Energy's Carlsbad Field Office to be able to answer.

We believe LANL should adopt a strategy of both less and more when it comes to

communication about both the Technical Assistance Team's research and the history of the suspect drum - less presentation of unsubstantiated (at this time) theories, but more background and process-related information. There is a lot of information that could quench a portion of the public's thirst for knowledge, such as more background on the TAT, including who is involved, what experiments are being conducted and why. Dr. Sauer's presentation included some of this information, but it should be made more available to the public.

We also believe LANL should extend its public outreach effort beyond legislative committee hearings. This does not have to be in a town hall fashion - in fact, an online FAQ or other method may be more appropriate. The bottom line is that there's a pressing need for more public information about the history of the drum and the investigation into the cause of the incident, and the current trickle of speculation is dangerous. It may also be appropriate to have an employee who is not from LANL be the spokesperson who explains the Technical Assistance Team's ongoing efforts, to avoid a conflict of interest due to LANL's overlapping involvement.

While the amount of information that can be

Please see LANL on the next page

Community Assurance Program: An Overview

By John Heaton

Carlsbad Mayor's Nuclear Task Force Chair

Elected officials have a fundamental responsibility to do everything possible to protect the health and safety of their citizens. February's underground fire and small radiological release at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, along with subsequent investigations pointing out operational and maintenance deficiencies, have raised concern with members of the public and their governing bodies at a national, state and even local level.

There are two recoveries that must occur with WIPP. First, is the recovery of the WIPP facility itself, in order to get back into operation as quickly as possible. Second, the more difficult task is to recover the lost confidence and trust associated with the project. For the recovery of trust to occur, it is imperative that an independent oversight group be established to review WIPP operations. These operations would initially be reviewed on a quarterly basis, then at a determined basis as deemed appropriate. Reports would then be made to the public and elected officials.

As part of this path forward, the Carlsbad Mayor's Nuclear Task Force envisions a "Community Assurance Program" (CAP) oversight panel consisting of representatives of the Carlsbad Environmental Monitoring and Research Center, the New Mexico Environment Department, the Mine, Safety and Health Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Transportation, the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board and the Department of Energy. CEMRC will be the lead agency in terms of developing a charter, assigning work responsibility and coordinating meetings. CAP monitoring will include Observable Accountability (OA) of actual job performance according to pre-established standards, overseeing responses to simulated crisis events and assessing the status of the equipment and facility. Ultimately, the goal of CAP is to restore confidence to the public through a comprehensive and understandable report that demonstrates WIPP's recovery and movement to excellence.

Perhaps most importantly, CAP will also address gaps in the current oversight and

regulatory monitoring system. Each agency has its own processes, but there has not been, historically, a comprehensive effort to bring all the agencies together. The regulatory agencies have become "siloed" and communications between agencies has been at a low level.

There's a lot of work left to do with planning the CAP, but CEMRC's Dr. Russell Hardy, designated by the nuclear task force, has been working hard to help bring the pieces together. The State of New Mexico and NMED have strongly voiced support for such a coalition, and most of the other oversight agencies have also indicated an interest in participating. It is worth restating that we are not creating a new oversight agency – we're just trying to bring the current agencies together to increase cooperative efforts, add additional direct observation and improve communication to the public.

We believe this program would ultimately be very helpful to WIPP, as it will help the project identify and verify that WIPP operations meet high standards of excellence and rebuild the project's credibility.

MONIZ From Page 1

encourage the DOE to find a way to get the high energy physics studies that have been taking place in the WIPP underground back up and running. We were very pleased that Secretary Moniz directly mentioned these underground experiments during his visit.

The DOE needs to remember what works. The Blue Ribbon Commission spotlighted the community consent model as an essential component for obtaining host communities and keeping a strong relationship with the residents of these host communities. Recent efforts by the DOE, including the Moniz visit, have shown that the agency understands this message. Low bids should not be accepted at the expense of safety or community consent. Communication has always been, and will always be, a top priority- especially with members of congress who are justifying budget expenses.

Strengthen Independent Oversight. We believe that many members of the public will not accept WIPP's recovery process as legitimate without some form of additional oversight and review. We recommend the creation of a consortium of existing WIPP regulators, such as the Carlsbad Environmental Monitoring and Research Center, the New Mexico Environment Department, the Environmental Protection Agency and other groups. A primary focus of these groups would be to compile existing regulatory efforts together in a manner that is digestible to the public.

Avoid unnecessary delays. We recognize that the DOE's significant effort to rectify all safety and maintenance infringements highlighted by the Accident Investigation Board reports, the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board, the Mine Safety and Health Administration and other agencies may take time. We also recognize that the safety of WIPP's workers, nearby communities and the environment are the top priority. However, we also believe that some of the delays have been due to bureaucratic reasons, not safety. Promptness in resuming roof bolting in the underground and the closure of Panel 6 are important to the facility's safety. Prompt release of WIPP's recovery plan is important to the credibility of the project.

Members of Carlsbad's community overwhelmingly viewed Secretary Moniz's visit as a positive event. Several decades ago, the Department of Energy and community of Carlsbad forged a strong relationship that resulted in the opening of the world class WIPP site. WIPP operated safely for 15 years, and many of the systems worked exactly as expected during February's fire and radiological incident. There are many repairs to be made, both at the facility and in the realm of community relations. There's a long road ahead, but we believe these repairs to be achievable.

LANL From Page 1

presented may be limited due to the ongoing accident investigation, there is still an expansive amount of information and explanation that can be appropriately disclosed. Experts at Los Alamos, or another member of the TAT team, are better able to field many of these questions than experts at WIPP.

New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Ryan Flynn and his staff have recently been very vocal in their criticism of LANL's apparent unwillingness to communicate with the state. LANL workers, for example, promised copies of a presentation to the NMED but then changed their minds. In contrast, Flynn and his staff have praised WIPP for its high level of communication. Perhaps the shift to the office of Environmental Management, which also oversees WIPP, will help unify these two efforts.

We recognize that there is no magical approach to public participation and dealing with the media that will satisfy everyone. There are organizations and individuals who will use anything that is said or not said to try to hamper WIPP's recovery efforts.

Nobody has ever said that transparency is pretty, just that it is the right thing to do.



Former state representative and Mayor's Nuclear Task Force Chair John Heaton speaks with Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz during the secretary's August visit to Carlsbad.

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