Milestone reached: Waste shipment leaves Los Alamos National Laboratory

June 2, 2009

Remote-handled transuranic waste will go to WIPP

LOS ALAMOS, New Mexico, June 2, 2009 — Los Alamos National Laboratory officials today announced the departure of the Laboratory's first shipment of a special type of radioactive waste destined for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in Carlsbad, New Mexico.

The material, known as "remote-handled transuranic waste" (RH-TRU), has been stored at the Laboratory since 1995. A total of 16 canisters are scheduled for shipment this year.

The shipments cleared the final regulatory hurdle on April 16, when the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) approved a report detailing the contents of the canisters and where the material was used.

“NMED asked us to begin shipments ‘expeditiously,’ and that’s what we’re doing,” said Michael Graham, LANL associate director for environmental programs. “We’ve done training to demonstrate we meet the NNSA’s stringent nuclear safety requirements, and we’re ready.”

The 16 canisters each contain three 55-gallon drums filled with rags, tools, plastics, glassware, and other equipment used in enclosures known as “hot cells” at the Laboratory’s Chemical and Metallurgy Research building in the 1970s and 1980s.

The canisters are currently stored in special underground shafts at the Laboratory’s Area G.

The Laboratory plans to prepare three to four shipments per week until all 16 canisters are gone.

Thanks to shielding and design, a loaded RH-TRU shipping cask meets the same Department of Transportation radiation safety requirements as a typical shipment to WIPP. Stringent handling procedures and satellite surveillance will keep the public safe.

The shipments will follow preapproved transportation routes. As with all shipments to WIPP, these operations will be coordinated with New Mexico law enforcement.

WIPP has conducted more than 7,200 shipments of transuranic waste since opening in 1999, including more than 200 shipments of RH-TRU.

Removal of the remote-handled waste is part of ongoing efforts to close Area G by 2015, as required in the New Mexico Environment Department consent order to which Los Alamos National Laboratory and the National Nuclear Security Administration of the Department of Energy are parties.

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