



U.S. Department of Energy
Carlsbad Field Office
Waste Isolation Pilot Plant
P.O. Box 3090
Carlsbad, New Mexico 88221

Media Contact:

Donavan Mager
WIPP Communications
(575) 234-7586

www.wipp.energy.gov

 @WIPPNews

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WIPP Ends Safety Pause

A safety pause, declared by Nuclear Waste Partnership in response to air quality issues in two remote areas of the WIPP underground, was ended and normal work in these areas has resumed. The pause began February 22 after workers detected elevated levels of carbon monoxide and volatile organic compounds (VOC) in two areas at extreme ends of the underground. The pause allowed time to thoroughly investigate each event while work in un-impacted portions of the WIPP underground continued.

We are learning from operating experience and continuing to improve our programs and processes to better protect workers," said Phil Breidenbach, NWP President and Project Manager. "We used the Safety Pause to improve our detection and measurement procedures; increase worker training and awareness of potential air quality issues, and develop procedures that help us recognize and respond to potential air quality issues before they become a problem."

Based on the findings from the investigation, improvements have been made to procedures and processes to help ensure that workers entering low airflow areas with potential poor air quality continue to be adequately protected. Emphasis on increasing ventilation to low airflow work areas in advance of planned activities will ensure workers entering these areas have sufficient fresh air. Additional warning signs were placed in these known low airflow areas to reflect where continuous air monitoring and additional ventilation is required for entry.

During the safety pause, additional training was provided to all workers on the use of air monitoring equipment, understanding alarm levels, and responding to alarms.

Historically, the buildup of diesel particulates, carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxide, as well as VOCs from the waste, have been detected in areas of the underground where there is minimal airflow or where the air is stagnant. These areas are generally found in the extreme north and south ends of the underground, or dead-end areas such as the entrance to closed waste panels. The WIPP Industrial Safety monitoring equipment alarms at a

much lower level than industry guidelines to ensure a conservative margin for personnel safety. Should workers detect elevated air quality conditions, they are trained to immediately retreat from the area.

Next WIPP Town Hall Meeting Scheduled April 7

The City of Carlsbad and DOE will co-host its quarterly Town Hall meeting, featuring updates on WIPP recovery activities, on 5:30 p.m., Thursday, April 7 at the Carlsbad City Council Chambers, 101 N. Halagueno Street. Live streaming of the meeting can be seen at <http://new.livestream.com/rv/>.