

Response to Inquiry August 3, 2008

Drum damaged during emplacement in the WIPP underground. WIPP temporarily halting shipments while undergoing a safety pause.

At 9:30 a.m. (MDT) on Sunday, August 3, a waste handling crew noted a 1 ½ to 2-inch gash on a 55-gallon drum in a stack of transuranic waste being emplaced in Room 3 of disposal Panel 4.

The 55-gallon drum was one of seven 55-gallon waste drums shrink-wrapped together in a circular configuration, called a seven-pack.

While still under investigation, it is believed that the cause of the incident was that the seven-pack being stacked by forklift struck a metal framework used to place magnesium oxide sacks in vertical columns.

A radiological swipe taken of the damaged area showed the drum to be free of contamination, indicating that radioactive material inside the drum was contained.

Continuous air monitors (CAMs) throughout the facility (including the disposal room) detected no airborne radioactivity.

Upon discovery of the gash, the ventilation system was switched to filtration mode, with all air from the underground filtered through a high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) system. Direct analysis of air filter samples collected in the ventilation exhaust also detected no airborne radioactivity.

All personnel in the disposal room were surveyed and found to be free of contamination. No injuries were involved.

As a result of this incident and several industrial safety issues during the past week, the WIPP facility is temporarily halting shipments while the facility undergoes a safety pause. The safety pause will focus on Conduct of Operations, which is a formalized process intended to achieve a high level of safety and performance accomplished through effective implementation and control of all facility operations.