

# Waste on Wheels

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By Bella Davis  
Santa Fe Reporter  
| August 10 at 5:25 PM

Concerns are mounting among Santa Feans who fear they could soon see more trucks barreling down Highway 285 with large drums of radioactive waste.

Longtime anti-nuclear activists were among the 60 or so people who turned up for a town hall hosted by county officials last week—an event that featured more questions than answers and spotlighted the problems that come from years of secrecy surrounding the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, America’s only long-term storage facility for transuranic radioactive waste, located near Carlsbad.

Commissioners Anna Hamilton and Hank Hughes arranged the meeting with activist group 285 ALL, which takes its name from the highway that serves as a major WIPP transportation route from northern to southern New Mexico.

Nuclear watchdog groups have for years warned that WIPP is expanding beyond its original mission. And that likely means, in turn, more toxic, potentially deadly nuclear materials rolling through Santa Fe, they say.

“This issue has really stuck with us because, first of all, most people don’t know about it and it’s new,” Cynthia Weehler of 285 ALL, said at the town hall. “What is happening right now is WIPP is entering a new mission, a completely new mission, and I keep trying to tell people, ‘It ain’t your daddy’s WIPP anymore.’”

County leaders couldn’t speak to many questions, saying much of the work at WIPP, run by a contractor for the US Department of Energy, is “classified,” meaning even local governments are often kept in the dark. On the other hand, County Emergency Management Director Martin Vigil said a spill was unlikely and, in the event there was one, the county is prepared to respond.

Later, in an interview with SFR, Vigil says he doesn’t know when shipments occur—much like he doesn’t receive a schedule from Walmart showing when its trucks will travel through town.

The watchdogs aren’t just reading tea leaves; there’s plenty to suggest that WIPP plans to expand.

The plant has courted controversy since before it opened in 1999. Public trust plummeted after two incidents in February 2014: a waste explosion and an airborne release of radioactive waste that exposed plant workers to small internal doses of plutonium, causing nearly a three-year shutdown.

Operations have since resumed. Several permit modification requests from DOE are pending approval from the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED): one to excavate a new shaft and another to build two new panels—the underground chambers that entomb containers of waste.

Also pending is an operating permit renewal application for WIPP. While renewal is required every 10 years, the current permit expired in December and has been administratively renewed for the time being. The environment department anticipates holding a public hearing about the renewal next year, according to a spokeswoman.

Nuclear watchdogs like Don Hancock, director of nuclear waste safety for the Southwest Research and Information Center, say the permit modification requests are being used as a way to expand WIPP well beyond its original scheduled closure in 2024.

“The reason Congress said, ‘You can’t issue a permit for more than 10 years,’ is to look at how the thing has gone and what’s going to happen in the future,” Hancock tells SFR. “Let’s make bunches of changes if necessary at the time of the renewal rather than having to spend regulatory and permittee and public time on a little modification here, little modification here.”

Responding to residents’ concerns, state environment department spokeswoman Maddy Hayden writes in an email to SFR: “NMED prioritizes WIPP permitting actions based on regulatory requirements, the health and safety of New Mexicans and the WIPP workforce, available resources, and readiness to proceed.”

She adds that NMED will decide on the most recent permit request “based on the contents of the request and public input.”

Charisma Troiano, a spokeswoman for the Department of Energy, tells SFR the agency does not consider its applications as “expansion” and notes the permitted capacity of the facility has not changed since 1992.

In Santa Fe, most concerns are focused on transportation. Trucks hauling waste from Los Alamos National Laboratory to WIPP use Highway 599, Interstate 25 and Highway 285; shipments from elsewhere further north also travel through Santa Fe County along 285.

Weehler of 285 ALL says a broader WIPP expansion will result in more shipments and a more dangerous form of waste—plutonium oxide—being transported through the county. DOE confirms plutonium oxide has already been shipped to WIPP.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine published a report last year detailing the Energy Department’s plans to dilute and dispose of surplus, weapons-grade plutonium in WIPP that backs up Wheeler’s concerns.

“Putting this much concentrated plutonium waste in the WIPP is not what the citizens of New Mexico or their governor agreed to when the facility was built,” the National Academies report states.

At last week’s town hall, confusion and frustration were apparent.

Castille Aguilar, an organizer with the activist group Youth United for Climate Crisis Action, many of whose members live on the Southside in close proximity to Highway 599, told the county officials: “My question is, and I don’t know if there’s going to be an answer, what are we doing to get nuclear out of our communities, not moving it to other communities but out all together?”

Aguilar said the transportation of nuclear waste through the Southside puts communities of color and low-income people “who are often sacrificed to these types of occurrences” at risk.

Later, Vigil told residents the County Fire Department is prepared to respond to waste shipment emergencies like traffic accidents, with preparedness efforts including a three-day exercise on how to respond to a transportation incident that was conducted in 2016. Vigil says having the WIPP transportation schedule wouldn’t change the county’s protocol.

“It sounds important but it really wouldn’t change a whole lot,” he tells SFR. “It would be similar to if we wanted to know every time a Walmart truck and their schedule, because, yeah, there’s some very real risks there, but would we change anything? Not really.”

Activists worry that if a breach were to happen during transportation—which Vigil said at the town hall is “pretty unlikely”—the county wouldn’t be able to respond in time “to stop the inhalation of particles,” Weehler said.

Vigil tells SFR that if WIPP does expand, the fire department would need additional, specialized training and different monitoring equipment.

“That [expansion] isn’t going to happen in a short amount of time, so I think we’re prepared for the stuff that’s out there now,” Vigil said.