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POLITICS AND POLICY

New Mexico Nuclear-Waste Dump Expected to Remain Closed Until 2016

Energy Department Estimates Cost of Cleanup, Recovery Effort at More Than \$500 Million

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By JOHN R. EMSHWILLER

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Updated Sept. 30, 2014 4:58 p.m. ET

The Energy Department said a major underground nuclear-waste repository in New Mexico, which has been closed since [two accidents](#) in February, is expected to remain closed until the first quarter of 2016, as cleanup and recovery efforts continue.

Previous Coverage:

Radioactive Release at New Mexico Waste Site Called 'Preventable'

Thirteen Workers Exposed to Radiation at Plant

U.S. Plans Changes at Waste Repository After Accidents

Bringing the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, known as WIPP, back into full operation could cost more than \$500 million, according to a report the department released on Tuesday. About \$242 million of that would be spent on getting the facility back to initial operations, the report said.

Another \$77 million to \$309 million would be used for capital upgrades needed to return the plant to full operation. That work could take up to three years, the department said.

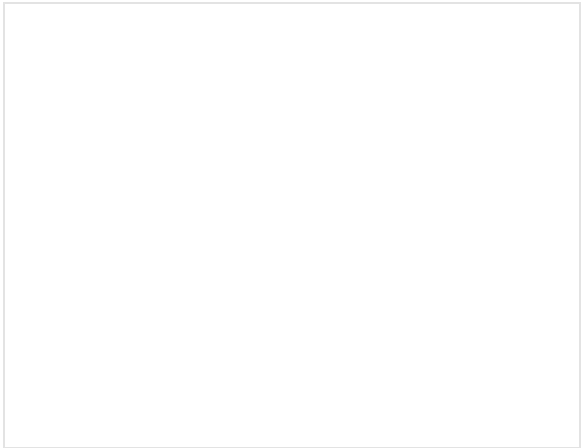
The 15-year-old WIPP complex, located more than 2,000 feet underground and 26 miles east of Carlsbad, N.M., holds more than 171,000 containers of radioactive waste from the nuclear-weapons program. For years, WIPP had been held up by government officials as a success story in the nation's often-troubled effort to deal with the radioactive legacy of that program.

Then, in early February, a truck fire in the underground complex closed the facility and required 13 workers to be treated for smoke inhalation. Nine days later, the facility suffered its first-ever radiological accident, apparently caused when a storage drum burst and spread contamination through part of the facility. Some radioactivity also got above ground, exposing 22 workers to some contamination. Energy Department officials have said they don't expect health problems to result.

A subsequent Energy Department investigation criticized WIPP management for failing to fully understand and control the risks at the site.

Tuesday's report said recovery efforts will include work to clean contaminated areas, which one Energy Department official at the news conference estimated might cover 10% or less of the complex. The capital upgrades will include an expanded ventilation system.

The report also said the drum believed to have caused the radiological accident contained a mixture of material that didn't meet the criteria for storage at WIPP. The Energy Department is taking various steps to ensure that problems don't arise with other storage drums, the report said.




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