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AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Radioactive waste from dozens of states could soon be buried in a Texas dump near the New Mexico border after Texas officials gave final approval Friday to rules allowing the shipments.

Texas lawmakers in 2011 approved the rural Andrews County site to take the waste and the Friday's unanimous vote by the Texas Low-Level Radioactive Compact Commission cleared a major hurdle to allow the waste burial.

Texas already had a compact legal with Vermont to take its waste. Environmentalists have argued against expanding the program to 36 more states, warning it could result in radioactive material rumbling through the state on trucks with few safeguards in case of an accident. They also say a problem at the waste dump could lead to potential underground water contamination.

Dallas-based Waste Control Specialists, which owns and operates the site, insists it will be safe. The waste would be entombed in concrete about 100 feet underground in an area with densely packed clay. The site still needs final approval from state environmental regulators, and company president Rod Baltzer said it could happen as early as next week.

Applications to bury waste at the Andrews site must be approved by the compact commission on a case-by-case basis. At least three have already been filed, Baltzer said. If they are approved, material could start arriving in May.

Waste Control Specialists officials say accidents are infrequent when low-level radioactive waste is moved. Data from the U.S. Department of Transportation's Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration show that, from 2003 through 2011, there were 72 incidents involving trucks with radioactive material traveling on highways. One person died and the accidents caused \$2.4 million in damages.

That compares with almost 64,000 incidents involving flammable/combustible liquids — the leader in hazardous materials accidents in the nine-year span. Seventy-six people have died in those incidents, which caused \$319.5 million in damages.

Texas officials say there is no requirement to notify law enforcement of which routes trucks carrying low-level waste will take.

Karen Hadden of the Texas SEED Coalition, an environmental group, warned the commission that many rural counties don't even have professional fire departments to respond in case of an accident.

"The magnitude of risk here is huge," Hadden said.

Hadden also said the commission should require independent audits of the shipments to make sure only low-level material is coming in. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality has an on-site inspector to monitor shipments and Baltzer said the facility won't take materials it's not licensed for.

"I'm not sure you can ever do enough to satisfy some people with the number of audits in place," Baltzer said.

Waste Control, which stores, processes and manages hazardous wastes at the site, has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to open the dump. In 2009, the state issued two licenses to the company to bury lowlevel radioactive waste, making it the nation's only dump for all classes — A, B and C — of nuclear debris and the first lowlevel site to open in 30 years.