

Federal radioactive facility opens

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Betsy Blaney|AP

Crews from Waste Control Specialists load the first of two containers with low-level radioactive waste from Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, into a reinforced 8-inch-thick concrete container at the 90-acre federal dump where it will remain forever, on Thursday, June 6, 2013, near Andrews, Texas. Officials from the Dallas-based company, the Department of Energy, New Mexico and Texas cut the ribbon to open the site a short time before the two containers were placed in the more than 9-foot-deep container.



THE FACILITY

- The Federal Waste Facility is constructed 100 feet below land surface, with the waste placed between 100 feet and 40 feet below land surface, and a 40-foot engineered concrete and clay cover.
- The design is comprised of seven-foot thick liner and a foot of reinforced concrete.
- It is the first time a commercial facility has been licensed to dispose of Class B and Class C federal waste.

A year and a half after Waste Control Specialists opened a state facility for dumping radioactive waste, the federal side of the facility opened up.

WCS officially cut the ribbon on the federal waste disposal facility, with 26 million cubic feet of space almost 100 feet below the land level, in Andrews County.

Rod Baltzer, the president of WCS, said Andrews and Eunice, N.M., have a suitable climate and the facility has the best technology to store the low-level radioactive waste.

“This area is known for its lack of rainfall, give or take last night,” Baltzer joked the day after a slew of storms tore through Andrews County.

The Thursday grand opening was the second stage of the two-part facility: the first part is a commercial, state-regulated facility and the second is the federal waste where the Department of Energy dumps material.

One of the main focuses during the press conference and of the officials at the facility was related to the radioactive waste at the Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Kathy Johns-Hughes, the director of the laboratory’s transuranic waste program, said the lab is trying to remove 3,706 cubic meters of waste from the facility amid wildfire concerns in New Mexico.

“Our urgency to get this job done still remains,” Johns-Hughes said, calling the opening of the facility “important, timely and necessary.”

The radioactive waste in Los Alamos is stored above-ground, a practice that Johns-Hughes said New Mexico discussed stopping 10 years ago.

Baltzer said although the seven-inches-thick reinforced cement containers will last longer than 300 years, it’s the red clay surrounding the containers and liners that will ensure the protection of the materials for an even longer period of time.

Bill Lindquist, the CEO of WCS, said he can’t yet estimate the revenues that will come in to the facility, but long term he said the federal facility will be more profitable because it is 11 times bigger than the state commercial facility.

After spending \$75 million in a bond issue, Andrews County will receive five percent of the growth revenue from each facility, as will the state of Texas.

Dr. Brian Gordon, a resident in Andrews, said the economic benefits and stabilization from the oil industry made him support the facilities.

“We’re all for it. We think it’s the safest place in the nation,” Gordon said.

The Gordons have lived in Andrews for 50 years, and Gordon's wife, Sue, said the oilfield has often been cyclical as far as economic benefits.

"There were real visionaries in our community to work for this," Sue Gordon said.

Baltzer said because any liquid radioactive waste brought to the facility is treated and converted to solid waste so leaks don't happen, such as those at the Hanford, Wash., nuclear site.

Dave Huizenga, a senior adviser with the Department of Energy, praised the efforts of WCS and Andrews, and emphasized the need to properly dispose of radioactive waste.

"We've got several more years or decades of cleanup from the Cold War days," Huizenga said. "That's what we do at the DOE."

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