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Retrieval of Hanford's Buried Transuranic Waste Begins

Beating by weeks the first deadline under last week's waste cleanup agreement, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and contractor Fluor Hanford, Inc. (FHI) have begun retrieval of suspect transuranic waste from the low level burial grounds at Hanford.

The drums contain contaminated debris from decades of nuclear materials production at the site, including protective clothing, gloves, tools, plastics, wood, and metal.

FHI workers will retrieve about 6,000 drums from the burial grounds in the coming year. In all, about 38,000 containers (76,000 drum equivalents) – in various shapes and stages of integrity – will be exhumed. Crews will inspect the containers and characterize their contents to determine final disposition. Transuranic waste will ultimately be shipped to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in New Mexico for disposal; low level and mixed low-level waste will be disposed of in appropriate facilities at Hanford.

"We are starting this campaign with the confidence that it's not only reducing risk to the environment, but also is done in a way that is safe to our workers and in close partnership with our state and federal regulators," said DOE Richland Operations Office Manager Keith A. Klein. "We're acting now before these drums can further degrade, become harder to retrieve, and affect the environment."

"It's taken a lot to get to this point -- where the workers are well trained, and our teams have prepared for every contingency and have taken every precaution," said Dick Wilde, FHI vice president of Waste Management/Groundwater Protection. "It has been a tremendous team effort."

At the same time as waste is coming out of the ground, DOE and FHI are also increasing Hanford's capabilities for inspecting and processing transuranic waste for disposal by expanding the capabilities of Hanford's Waste Receiving and Processing Facility. Operating staff has been increased to boost production and additional equipment will soon be on line to accelerate the preparation of waste for shipment to WIPP.

About 1,800 drums of transuranic waste stored in Hanford's warehouses have been shipped to the disposal facility in New Mexico since 2000. FHI made 37 shipments last year and expects to triple the number of shipments to New Mexico in the coming year.

"With our number of shipments on a steep incline, we're going to process most of the current backlog of stored transuranic waste to ship by 2005," said Klein. "Beyond its importance in protecting the environment, pulling this waste out of the ground will enable us to keep that shipping momentum going

well into the next decade.”

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