NEWS from
The Savannah River Site

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For Immediate Release

SRS Ships 25,000th Drum to New Mexico

AIKEN, S.C. (February 12, 2008) – Accelerated shipment efforts are paying off at the Department of Energy's (DOE) Savannah River Site (SRS), as the 25,000th drum of transuranic (TRU) waste has left South Carolina on its way to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in New Mexico.

The end is now in sight for SRS's legacy TRU waste program, with the last of the 30,000 Cold War-era drums scheduled to leave the site in 2009.

"This is a huge accomplishment," says Washington Savannah River Company (WSRC) President Leo Sain. "It has taken teamwork and creativity by the whole site."

Since the site began operations in the early 1950s, more than 30,000 drums – about 11,000 cubic meters – of TRU waste accumulated on pads, covered over with dirt, awaiting final disposition. TRU waste consists of clothing, tools, rags, debris, and other such items contaminated with radioactive elements, primarily plutonium, with an atomic number greater than uranium at specific concentrations.

When WIPP opened in 1999, it provided the needed disposition path. In 2001, SRS began shipping its TRU waste. But there were strict requirements as to what could and could not be shipped to WIPP. Liquids and aerosol cans, for example, are prohibited items. Each drum had to be examined to ensure all its contents were allowable. Drums that passed these tests were characterized, packaged, and shipped to WIPP. Those that contained prohibited items were put aside to be dealt with later, when a facility was operational that could perform the remediation.

By 2005, drums that passed the initial tests were gone, and there was one facility at SRS that was capable of remediating a limited number of drums and rendering them WIPP-acceptable. Remediation involves emptying a drum, picking among the contents to remove the prohibited items, and repacking it. Because of the nature of the material, the work is done in special containments and glovebags, with special tools for safety.

SRS needed to develop other capabilities, and it did. In the space of one year, three other remediation facilities in three site areas were constructed, started up, worked off all their available feed, and shut down. A fourth, located in F Canyon, is still running, and the finish line is in sight.

“This was one of the best examples of teamwork I’ve ever been associated with,” says Sain of the eventual TRU success. “Everyone here has a full plate, and yet people and organizations across the site pitched in and helped the TRU program meet our customer’s expectations.”

SRS TRU production and shipments are now at a steady state. The site generates less than 200 drums a year through regular facility operations, compared to the 90 legacy drums that are being shipped off site each week now.

DOE’s original plans called for shipping all of SRS’ stored TRU waste by the year 2034. The accelerated program will be completed 26 years early, saving the taxpayer over $100 million.

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