

June 5, 2018



Frequently Asked Questions on the proposal to bring nuclear waste to Idaho from the Hanford shutdown nuclear site

What is the proposal?

The proposal is to bring 7,000 cubic meters of plutonium-contaminated waste from the Hanford nuclear site in eastern Washington to Idaho. It would be characterized, treated, and repackaged at the Advanced Mixed Waste Treatment Project (AMWTP) at the Idaho National Laboratory (INL). It would then be shipped to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in New Mexico for disposal.

What does 7,000 cubic meters “look like”?

It takes 33,600 55-gallon drums to hold 7,000 cubic meters.

What does it mean to “characterize” waste?

Workers are looking for material that is prohibited from shipping or disposal or both. Radioactive waste that can't be shipped contains liquids, pressurized containers, sealed containers larger than 4 liters, and pyrophoric material. A problem with the proposal is that the waste would come to Idaho to be characterized but uncharacterized waste might well contain these prohibited items. In fact, the Department of Energy (DOE) admits that complying with the legal shipping requirements “would eliminate the ability to ship any significant amount of waste to the AMWTP.”

What does “treatment” entail?

The prohibited material is removed or neutralized. At the AMWTP, 55-gallon drums containing treated waste are also compacted so that several fit in one 80-gallon drum. This does not save as much waste in WIPP as it might seem because the rooms at WIPP are all sized for 55-gallon drums.

What is the 1995 Idaho Nuclear Settlement Agreement?

The State of Idaho signed an agreement in 1995 with the DOE and the Department of the Navy (since the Navy has a nuclear-powered fleet and sends its spent reactor fuel to Idaho) that provides some protection for Idaho becoming a nuclear waste dump. For instance, it lays out firm schedules and amounts for nuclear waste leaving Idaho (which helps force cleanup), bans commercial spent fuel from the state, and sets conditions for any other waste to come to Idaho.

What are the Settlement Agreement conditions for waste coming to Idaho?

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Nuclear waste can come to Idaho for treatment, *but it must come in and leave within one year.* That limitation has worked so far, and a number of DOE nuclear weapons sites have sent small amounts of plutonium-contaminated waste to Idaho. It has been treated and shipped out within the year. But that timeframe depends either on the originating site being willing and able to take waste back or on WIPP being fully operational and able to take the waste as it is treated.

And there's the rub. The DOE has already claimed it would be too expensive to ship treated waste back to Hanford, and WIPP is no longer fully operational after two accidents in 2014 and the wear and tear of 20 years of operation. If the federal government succeeds in convincing Idaho officials to erase the time limit, waste might be stranded here, above the Snake River Aquifer.

What are some of the benefits of the proposal?

Nearly all the plutonium-contaminated waste at INL slated for treatment at the AMWTP has been processed, so the facility could close as soon as next year. The most frequently cited benefit of the plan is that it would keep the AMWTP operating for several more years treating Hanford waste.

Some of Hanford's plutonium-contaminated waste might be treated sooner, though the timeline and economic costs of this proposal have not been analyzed.

What are some of the problems and risks?

Uncharacterized waste can't be shipped without changing important safety regulations. There are good reasons for the requirements and prohibitions, and shipping uncharacterized waste will be more difficult and dangerous. The shipments from Hanford to INL would go through some of Idaho's most populated, fertile regions, including Boise, Twin Falls, and Pocatello.

The public had a voice in the cleanup agreements at both INL and Hanford. It is not certain that the State of Washington will agree to the new plan. The overriding priority there is to try to deal with 54 million gallons of high-level waste stored in leaking buried tanks. The plutonium-contaminated waste isn't scheduled for treatment for a number of years. Would the plan take sorely needed funds and jobs and shift them to Idaho?

In addition, using the AMWTP for Hanford waste might redirect INL funds and delay progress on a number of already-scheduled projects crucial to the long-term protection of Idaho's water.

The 1995 Nuclear Settlement Agreement includes strict timelines for getting plutonium-contaminated waste out of Idaho. Because of the WIPP accidents, INL is already missing shipping deadlines and is storing a backlog of ready-to-ship waste. If Hanford waste came in, it would add to the pile up.

What's next?

The plan hasn't really been developed yet, and many factors have to be considered before a workable decision can be made. This is an excellent time for the public to enter the debate.

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