

DEFENSE NUCLEAR FACILITIES SAFETY BOARD

October 3, 2025

TO: Technical Director
FROM: WIPP Cognizant Engineer
SUBJECT: Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) Report for September 2025

DNFSB Staff Activity. On June 18, 2025, the Board transmitted a letter to the Department of Energy (DOE) regarding the reliability of the shafts and hoists used in underground worker evacuation (see WIPP Monthly for June 2025). DOE Carlsbad Field Office (CBFO) personnel briefed the Board on the topic on September 30, 2025.

A DNFSB staff team, consisting of an emergency planning and response subject matter expert, the WIPP site cognizant engineer, the Nuclear Programs and Analysis Group Lead, and a Los Alamos National Laboratory resident inspector, was on-site during September 9–10, 2025, to observe WIPP’s annual full-scale emergency exercise. On September 9, 2025, the staff team walked down the waste handling building, the salt pocket refurbishment project area, and the active waste emplacement panel. This included observing the operability of both the salt-handling and waste hoists. On September 10, 2025, the staff team observed the exercise across five key emergency response locations, including the underground incident scene, the central monitoring room, the incident command post, the emergency operations center, and the personnel decontamination unit.

Additionally, the cognizant engineer held weekly meetings to maintain awareness of mining and waste handling activities.

Annual Full Scale Emergency Exercise. On September 10, 2025, WIPP personnel conducted their annual full-scale emergency exercise. The scenario involved a roof fall (collapse event) in the underground mine, which impacted waste containers and injured two workers. As a result of the collapse, the waste containers released radioactive materials, contaminating all five nearby workers. Per the scenario, the radiological release was filtered by the new underground ventilation system. The exercise featured participation with personnel from Salado Isolation Mining Contractors, LLC (SIMCO), CBFO, and several offsite response entities, including the Carlsbad Fire Department, the Carlsbad Medical Center, and the Mosaic Potash Mine Rescue Team. The exercise was also observed by a ten-member team from DOE’s Office of Enterprise Assessments and a representative from the State of New Mexico Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. SIMCO Emergency Management personnel are preparing a formal after-action report to evaluate the exercise.

Salt Pocket Refurbishment Project. This month, DOE announced the completion of the salt pocket refurbishment project. The year-long project performed by subcontractor, Cementation USA, Inc., included demolishing the loading pocket and associated structural steel, re-mining and supporting the ground, and constructing an entirely new pocket. Upon completion, SIMCO personnel resumed salt hauling operations both underground and at the surface.

Utility Shaft Project. On September 24, 2025, SIMCO personnel received Critical Decision 4 approval to start operation after addressing the condition changes needed to retain the headframe and hoisting equipment installed by subcontractor Harrison Western Shaft Sinkers.