DEFENSE NUCLEAR FACILITIES SAFETY BOARD

September 14, 2026

Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) Cognizant Engineer Report for August 2026

DNFSB Staff Activity: The WIPP and National Transuranic Waste Program cognizant engineer held periodic meetings to maintain awareness of mining and waste handling activities.

Waste Handling Operations Near Miss: On August 3, 2026, a failure of the counterweights for a lifting fixture used to lift waste payloads and equipment caused the fixture to tip to its side while being lifted. A worker in the area tried to stabilize the load by hand and stepped into an area that required hard hats, though the worker was not wearing one. Waste Handling operations personnel identified this and several other issues with the response to the event, which they are addressing with training. No employees were injured. Salado Isolation Mining Contractors, LLC (SIMCO) categorized the event as a near miss.

Roof Bolt Failure Near Miss: On August 6, 2026, Mine Operations and Waste Handling personnel were underground near the waste shaft bottom. The Waste Handling Engineer reported hearing a roof bolt fail about 200 feet away, striking the ground in the center of the drift. This occurrence reflected a failure of the roof bolt lanyard to perform its safety function (see WIPP Monthly for July 2026). After investigation, SIMCO personnel identified a second failure mode of lanyards if attached too close to a roof bolt penetration of the overhead fence, where the wire is cut for the reaming bit. Being too close to the cut wires causes the chain-link to unravel, allowing the lanyard to slip off. SIMCO management directed an enhanced visual inspection covering 100% of bolt lanyards to confirm that no lanyards were connected within 4” of compromised chain mesh. On August 27, 2026, waste emplacement, which had been suspended during the lanyard re-inspection, resumed.

Air Intake Shaft (AIS) Hoist Incident: On August 19, 2026, while performing initial testing of a newly installed hoist rope on the Air Intake Shaft (AIS) hoist, the hoist bound up in the shaft due to twisting in the new rope. The twisting was undetected and misdiagnosed by hoisting and engineering personnel, who withdrew the hoist until it bound up sufficiently to exceed the strength rating and break the hoist rope, causing the hoist cage to fall to the bottom of the shaft (approximately 1500 ft). SIMCO has commissioned an external review from corporate reach-back personnel including their lead Cause Analyst, as well as requesting the Mine Safety and Health Administration Technical Group to evaluate the event and SIMCO’s response actions. There were no injuries. The AIS hoist was rendered out of service by the event, and decisions will need to be made as to whether it will be repaired or SIMCO will dismantle it and start early on the replacement with a salt production hoist in its place.

Hoisting Capability Project Update: WIPP management reported that the Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act, 2027, provides FY27 funding for the Hoisting Capability Project, allowing the project to continue advancing during the period of the continuing resolution. The Carlsbad Field Office and SIMCO had advocated for a continuing resolution anomaly to provide the necessary funding for the project during the continuing resolution period.