Feds Look to Ship Radioactive Waste

SHANNON DININNY,Associated Press

RICHLAND, Wash. (AP) — Federal officials are looking to ship some 3 million gallons of radioactive waste from Washington state to New Mexico, giving the government more flexibility to deal with leaking tanks at Hanford Nuclear Reservation, officials said Wednesday.

The Department of Energy said its preferred plan would ultimately dispose of the waste in a massive repository — called the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant — near Carlsbad, N.M, where radioactive materials are buried in rooms excavated in vast salt beds nearly a half-mile underground.

The federal proposal was quickly met with criticism from a New Mexico environmental group that said the state permit allowing the government to bury waste at the plant would not allow for shipments from Hanford, the nation's most contaminated nuclear site.

Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., said WIPP specifically prohibits waste from Hanford and any proposal to modify permit language in this case would need "strong justification and public input."

"WIPP has demonstrated success in its handling of defense TRU waste," Udall said in a statement. "With regard to Hanford waste, I urge all parties involved to exhibit caution and scientific integrity to ensure that DOE is abiding by the law and that the waste classifications are justified."

The waste near Carlsbad includes such things as clothing, tools and other debris.

Between 2000 and 2011, the Hanford site sent the equivalent of about 25,000 drums of such so-called transuranic waste, which is radioactive but less deadly than the worst, high-level waste.

The latest proposal would target just a fraction of the transuranic waste from Hanford's underground tanks, which hold a toxic, radioactive stew of liquids, sludge and solids.

Federal officials have identified six leaking tanks at Hanford. Five of those tanks contain transuranic waste, said Tom Fletcher, assistant manager of the tank farms for the Energy Department.

Dave Huizenga, head of the Energy Department's Environmental Management program, said the transfer would not impact the safe operations of the New Mexico facility.

"This alternative, if selected for implementation in a record of decision, could enable

the Department to reduce potential health and environmental risk in Washington State," said Huizenga.

Don Hancock, of the Albuquerque-based watchdog group Southwest Research and Information opposing the transfer to New Mexico, said this is not the first time DOE has proposed bringing more waste to the plant near Carlsbad.

"This is a bad, old idea that's been uniformly rejected on a bipartisan basis by politicians when it came up in the past, and it's been strongly opposed by citizen groups like mine and others," Hancock said. "It's also clear that it's illegal."

Disposal operations near Carlsbad began in March 1999. Since then, more than 85,000 cubic meters of waste have been shipped to WIPP from a dozen sites around the country.

Any additional waste from Hanford would have to be analyzed to ensure it could be stored at the site because a permit issued by the New Mexico Environment Department dictates what kinds of waste and the volumes that can be stored there.

WIPP spokeswoman Deb Gill said the facility does not anticipate any problems with its existing capacity as permitted under law.

Officials estimate that some 7,000 to 40,000 drums of waste would be trucked to New Mexico, depending on how the waste is treated and its final form.

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee says the proposal is a good start in the process of getting rid of Hanford's waste.

"I will be insistent that the full cycle of technical review and permitting is resolved so that any grouted material does not remain in the state of Washington," Inslee said.

Inslee traveled Wednesday to Hanford to learn more about the leaking waste tanks. His trip came a day after federal officials acknowledged budget cuts may disrupt efforts to empty the aging vessels.

Inslee said sending waste to New Mexico is two to four years away. He also said a system is in place to treat the groundwater should contamination from the leaks reach it.

In the meantime, Inslee plans to push Congress to fully fund this proposal, saying "every single dollar of it is justified."

South-central Washington's Hanford Nuclear Reservation is home to 177 underground tanks, which hold toxic and radioactive waste left from decades of plutonium production for the country's nuclear weapons arsenal.

The tanks hold some 56 million gallons of waste and have long surpassed their intended 20-year lifespan. The Energy Department has said the leaking tanks could

be releasing as much as 1,000 gallons a year.

State and federal officials have said the leaking materials pose no immediate threat to public safety or the environment, but the leaks raise concerns about the potential for groundwater to be contaminated and, ultimately, reach the neighboring Columbia River about 5 miles away.

Inslee has said repeatedly that Washington state has a "zero tolerance" policy for leaks.

In a letter to Inslee, the Department of Energy estimated it will have to eliminate $92 million for its Office of River Protection, which oversees efforts to empty the tanks and build a plant to treat the waste. The cuts will result in furloughs or layoffs impacting about 4,800 workers in Washington, including 2,800 contract employees dealing with tank waste and construction of a plant to treat the waste, the agency said.

Inslee spokesman David Postman said the governor's initial concern is for the workers, but he emphasized budget constraints cannot be an excuse to delay response to the leaking tanks.

The U.S. government spends some $2 billion each year on cleanup at Hanford — one-third of its entire budget for nuclear cleanup nationally — so the project is still in line to receive most of its usual federal funding.

Deputy Secretary of Energy Daniel Poneman wrote in his letter layoffs and furloughs may curtail progress related to closing the tanks.

The cuts within the Energy Department's budget are the result of debate in Congress, where Republicans and President Barack Obama are fighting over how to curtail the nation's debt.

Energy Department officials said their budget was being reduced by some $1.9 billion.

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