

Waste Isolation Pilot Plant President Demoted

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ALBUQUERQUE, New Mexico (AP) — The president of a troubled nuclear waste dump has been demoted as investigations into a truck fire and radiation release that contaminated 17 workers near completion.

Farok Sharif has been replaced by Bob McQuinn as president and project manager of the Nuclear Waste Partnership, said URS Corp., the contractor that runs the underground dump for the U.S. Department of Energy.

In a statement Thursday, the company said McQuinn has 35 years of experience in Department of Energy nuclear and high-hazard operations, including six years in charge of nuclear operations at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Sharif has been moved to a new job overseeing the program to move nuclear waste to other locations while the Waste Isolation Pilot Project is shuttered. He also will work with other Department of Energy sites to develop plans for the temporary storage of their waste, the company said.

In an internal memo, James Taylor, general manager of global operations for URS, said he also expects to appoint a recovery manager in the next few days.

"As I mentioned to the NWP workforce last week, we are committed to returning WIPP to safe, compliant operations," Taylor said. "I am confident these structural realignments will strengthen our recovery efforts."

Donavan Mager, spokesman for the Nuclear Waste Partnership, said company officials would have no further comment on the job changes.

The Waste Isolation Pilot Project is the nation's only deep underground nuclear waste repository and a cornerstone of the Energy Department's \$5 billion-a-year program for cleaning up waste scattered at federal labs across the country from decades of nuclear bomb making.

Waste shipments to the dump were halted after a truck caught fire in the mine Feb. 5. Nine days later, a radiation release shuttered all operations.

Seventeen workers tested positive for radiation exposure after the alarm sounded and emergency filtration systems were activated. Crews currently are working to clear routes into the half-mile deep mine so workers can get underground to figure out what caused the leak.

In a letter to the community Wednesday, Joe Franco, head of the Energy Department's Carlsbad office, said he expects the team investigating the truck fire

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to finalize its report soon. A review of the radiation leak is expected later this month.

Mager said the company expects crews to be able to get underground within the next week.

Also Thursday, Carlsbad Mayor Dale Janway and the Department of Energy were hosting another town hall meeting on developments at the dump. Officials say they plan to host the meetings every Thursday evening at the Carlsbad City Council Chambers as long as there is community interest. The meetings also are being streamed live online.

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