New facility boosts Lab’s ability to ship transuranic waste

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"375 Box Line" facility to allow workers to repackage radioactive items stored in large boxes

LOS ALAMOS, New Mexico, February 9, 2012—Construction has begun on a new facility that will help Los Alamos National Laboratory accelerate the shipment of transuranic (TRU) waste stored in large boxes at Technical Area 54, Area G.

The new “375 Box Line” facility will allow the Laboratory to repackage boxes up to 25 feet long that contain TRU waste from as long ago as the 1970s.

Mostly equipment stored in fiberglass-reinforced boxes, the materials must be repackaged into containers that meet stringent requirements before they can be shipped to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) near Carlsbad, N.M., for permanent disposal.

“This facility will help us accelerate shipment of TRU waste,” said Waste Program and Services Project Director Andy Baumer. “Since the majority of our TRU waste inventory that is in large boxes can be processed in this facility, it’s going to be our workhorse.”

The new facility will contain a number of safety features, including fire protection and high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filtering.

Construction is scheduled for completion in March 2012.

Before WIPP opened in 1999, waste generated from the Lab’s national security mission was packaged and stored at Area G. In an agreement announced last month, the Laboratory and the State of New Mexico have agreed that removing the above-ground TRU waste stored there is the Laboratory’s highest environmental cleanup priority.

TRU waste consists of clothing, tools, rags, debris, soil and other items contaminated with radioactive elements, such as plutonium. Each of these man-made elements has an atomic number greater than uranium, so they are labeled transuranic, for “beyond uranium” on the periodic table of elements.

The Lab’s TRU Waste Program has shipped record numbers of waste to WIPP in each of the past three years. During the past year, the program sent 171 shipments—more than 2,500 containers—of TRU waste safely to WIPP.

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