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State: No To 2nd Nuclear Dump

FOR THE RECORD: This story incorrectly reported the position of Jim Conca of the Carlsbad Environmental Monitoring and Research Center on the possible use of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant for the disposal of high-level radioactive waste. Conca said he believes WIPP is not suitable for that purpose.

By John Fleck

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The Department of Energy's love affair with disposing radioactive trash at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant doesn't mean it wants to send nuclear power plant fuel there as well.

But if WIPP had a twin sister?

In a statement last week, the federal agency said it had no interest in sending highly radioactive power plant fuel to WIPP. But the agency did not rule out the possibility of sending the spent fuel to a new site in the same area.

Officials with Gov. Bill Richardson's administration countered Wednesday with an emphatic "no" to that idea.

The spat is a local manifestation of a national debate, as officials begin a search for an alternative to Yucca Mountain in Nevada, which was to be the disposal site for highly radioactive fuel rods from U.S. nuclear power plants.

Jim Conca, head of the Department of Energy-funded Carlsbad Environmental Monitoring and Research Center, thinks that while WIPP itself is not suitable for the highly radioactive power plant waste, it makes sense to consider a site nearby.

There is enough land in the immediate vicinity already under federal ownership to build a second facility to replace Yucca Mountain, Conca said in a telephone interview Thursday.

With the infrastructure already in place and a trained work force available in the Carlsbad area, the site would make an ideal alternative, Conca said.

Newly appointed Energy Secretary Steven Chu announced in March that the Obama administration was abandoning the project and launching a search for a new site. To begin that process, administration officials are convening a panel to consider alternatives.

The New Mexico version of the debate centers on the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, a 2,150-foot deep salt mine opened in 1999 for the disposal of plutonium-contaminated radioactive waste from decades of nuclear weapons work.

As the only deep underground radioactive waste disposal site, WIPP is often described as "the only drain in the bathtub" when it comes to the nation's nuclear waste, and it frequently comes up in discussions of possible destinations for waste other than the plutonium contamination for which it was originally built.

State officials, afraid its mission would be expanded to take other, more highly radioactive waste once it was open, insisted on tough restrictions in federal law to prevent that from happening.

In a statement issued last week, the Department of Energy said it would abide by those restrictions. "Legislation and legally binding documents specifically prohibit ... other waste forms from being disposed of at WIPP," the statement said.

"WIPP has nothing to do with Yucca Mountain," said Roger Nelson, WIPP's chief scientist, in a telephone interview.

But the statement did not rule out finding other deep underground salt beds for the waste once destined for Yucca Mountain. And WIPP site advocates say the same salt beds used for WIPP would likely be a leading candidate.

Nelson noted that the original plans for WIPP, developed in the 1970s, called for two underground levels — one for the plutonium waste now being disposed there, and a second deeper underground for Yucca Mountain-type

waste.

That second level was never built, but ever since, proponents have pointed to the possibility that WIPP or something like it might eventually be a destination for nuclear power plant waste.

New Mexico Deputy Environment Secretary Jon Goldstein issued a statement saying any change in the mission of WIPP itself would be unacceptable to the state.

"Governor Richardson's position is crystal clear," Goldstein said. "He will not allow WIPP's mission to change by accepting higher level waste as he believes the present mission is working very well."

Asked in a follow-up e-mail whether the state would also object to a new facility in the same area to handle more highly radioactive waste, Goldstein responded, "Our opposition applies across New Mexico."