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INL meets criteria for mercury storage site

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IDAHO FALLS — Why the Idaho National Laboratory?

That's a question many people who attended a public hearing Tuesday on the Department of Energy's plans to store up to 10,000 metric tons of mercury at one facility wanted to know. The INL is one of seven sites throughout the country being considered.

Why not store it at the DOE's Oak Ridge, Tenn., site, where the department currently stores 1,200 metric tons of the highly toxic substance? The Mercury Export Ban Act of 2008 explicitly exempted that site.

The legislation bans the export of elemental mercury beginning in 2013 and directs DOE to have a longterm storage site designated and ready by then to store and manage elemental mercury generated in the United States. Mercury is a neurotoxin that is toxic to humans, ecosystems and wildlife.

The INL sits over the sole-source aquifer for more than 200,000 people in Idaho.

The short answer for why the INL is in the running is that it and the six other sites under consideration all met the criteria the DOE established. That includes being accessible to major transportation routes, having a wealth of already available environmental information regarding the site, the ability to permit under the state's hazardous waste laws, having available infrastructure, and whether there were existing facilities which could handle this type of material.

Each DOE site was asked to evaluate the criteria and report whether they could meet them. Seven sites, including the INL, met the standards.

The INL has two existing facilities and a location where a facility could be built that meet the criteria.

The DOE is conducting an environmental impact statement encompassing all the sites and expects to decide where to store the mercury in fall 2010. According to Bill Levitan, director of DOE's office of compliance, officials will look at several issues. Those include the potential effects on public health from construction, operation and transportation of the mercury; impacts on surface and groundwater, air quality, plants and animals, geology and soil; and the possible effects of potential intentional destructive acts, including sabotage and terrorism.

A draft EIS will be issued this fall, and DOE will host another public hearing in Idaho Falls this winter. Levitan said officials will be able to address the risk factors in much greater detail then.

Both short- and longterm exposure to elemental mercury can cause health problems, including damage to the central nervous system, kidneys and other organs. Prolonged exposure can cause brain damage and death. Mercury exposure can lead to serious developmental problems in children.

According to a DOE fact sheet, risks to the public are minimal when elemental mercury is stored correctly. It is subject to strict controls to prevent or reduce exposure or release into the environment.

Though mercury is a commodity, the law requires it be managed as hazardous waste. The legislation mandates the facility be permitted in accordance with the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, the federal law that oversees hazardous waste. Since the state is the one that issues a RCRA permit, "in effect, we will be following the state's requirements," Levitan said.

To store 10,000 metric tons of mercury would require a facility of about 150,000 square feet, which is about the size of the Idaho Falls Wal-Mart, Levitan said. Mercury is mainly stored in 76-pound flasks and is also stored in 1 metric ton containers.

The 76-pound flasks would be stored triplestacked on pallets with drip trays. The 1 metric ton containers would be singlestacked on drip trays.

Levitan said he has visited the Tennessee site where the DOE has stored its elemental mercury since 1996. The air is monitored, and the containers are regularly inspected.

"It's like watching paint dry," he said. "There have never been any releases at all."

Those assurances didn't change the minds of the five people who spoke at the public hearing, all opposed to storing mercury at the INL.

The INL's location over the Snake River Plain Aquifer poses "unique and unacceptable risks," said Robert Bullock, the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality's hazardous waste permitting manager.

To bring in new waste "that places our aquifer at risk is not in the best interests of Idaho," Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, testified by letter during the meeting.



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About 15 members of the general public attended a public hearing Tuesday on the Department of Energy's proposal to store the nation's elementary mercury stockpile at one site, possibly the Idaho National Laboratory.
