

WM2014 Conference Panel Report

PANEL SESSION 002 – Hot Topics is US DOE Environmental Management

Co-Chairs: **James Gallagher**, *Gallagher Consulting*
Martin Schneider, *Exchange Monitor Publications and Forums*

Panel Reporter: **Linda Lehman**, *CH2M HILL*

Panelists:

1. **Melody Bell**, *Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Capital and Corporate Services*
2. **Christine Gelles**, *Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary for Waste Management*
3. **Mark Gilbertson**, *Deputy Assistant Secretary for Site Restoration*
4. **Mathew Moury**, *Deputy Assistant Secretary for Safety and Security*
5. **Ken Picha**, *Deputy Assistant Secretary for Waste and Nuclear Materials*

Safety and budgets emerged as two of the hottest topics facing the Department of Energy during the annual DOE Hot Topics panel discussion Monday morning. The hottest safety issues surround the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant project where an underground equipment fire in early February, followed several days later by the release of radioactivity within the mine that set off the Continuous Air Monitor and activated the ventilation system, brought the entire operation to a halt as DOE tries to understand what happened and how to respond.

DOE was criticized by city officials from Carlsbad, New Mexico for not keeping City officials and the public informed as to what is happening and what DOE plans to do about it. The Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary for Waste Management, **Christine Gelles**, said DOE is doing a lot to keep the public informed but since no one has yet entered the mine since the problem occurred, there isn't much that can be reported. She reiterated DOE's long-held commitment that the number one priority is the health and safety of its workers, the public and the environment.

When asked why no one has yet entered WIPP to see what happened, she reminded her audience that this is the first incident at WIPP in its 15 years of operation and that plutonium and americium are involved. Therefore they are moving cautiously and bringing in experienced people to help develop response actions. In the meantime, operations at WIPP are halted and DOE is working with waste generators who are impacted by the shutdown.

Budget issues continue to cause concerns, even though the 2014 budget approved by Congress is the highest in two years. The Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Site Restoration, **Mark Gilbertson** said they are learning lessons from the sequestration experience that will help them be more efficient and better able to respond to budgetary issues. He said other federal agencies have the same problems and they are sharing information routinely now. Flat funding has its downside, especially as the department takes on new responsibilities such as the decommissioning of the Paducah facilities.

Another hot topic for the agency, one that continues to be discussed, is the aging DOE workforce. More than half of those working in the DOE EM system are over 50 years old and DOE will have to not only replace them, but find ways to retain the corporate memory that will

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otherwise go out the door when they retire. **Melody Bell**, the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Capital and Corporate Services said the agency is looking at succession planning, maintaining the right skill mix for its long term mission and its contracting strategies. She said a gap analysis for its mission critical needs is now under way.

The safety call was heard clearly from **Matthew Moury**, the Deputy Assistance Secretary of Safety and Security. “Rules and slogans don’t drive a safety culture. Leaders do,” he said. As such, DOE continues to invest in a multi-level approach to safety. An avowed, passionate advocate of the Integrated Safety Management System (ISMS), Moury said EM has the best safety record in the DOE complex while doing some of the most difficult work and he wants to make sure this record continues.

Ken Picha, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Waste and Nuclear Materials discussed how innovative technology has paved the way for new retrieval methods at Hanford. Three to five tanks have now been retrieved in the Hanford C Farm using a mobile arm. Similar successes have also been accomplished at the Defense Waste Processing Facility located at Savannah River Site and resulted in a 10% increase in canister production over last year’s numbers.

Savannah River is now building new storage vaults on the scale of 30 million gallons of capacity which measures over 400 feet in diameter. These mammoth tanks will result in huge savings over the life cycle of the project.