The state of New Mexico in the southwestern region of the United States has given the Los Alamos National Laboratory a deadline for securing 57 nuclear-waste barrels that were linked to a radiation leak in February, according to news reports.

New Mexico Environment Secretary Ryan Flynn said the nuclear-waste drums may pose an “imminent” and “substantial” danger to health or the environment, NBC News reported. He said the laboratory had until Wednesday to propose how to secure the barrels to prevent further leaks.

The U.S. Energy Department earlier said it had detected damage to at least one waste barrel that had been transferred from Los Alamos to the Waste Isolation Plant near Carlsbad, New Mexico. The department said the barrel had signs of deterioration from high temperatures, including an unsealed cover. The barrel was discovered as the result of an investigation into a leak in February that contaminated 22 employees of the facility with low-level radiation.
Los Alamos given deadline to secure nuclear-waste barrels linked to radiation leak

Investigators have suggested that the nitrate-salt bearing containers used to package the barrels may have overheated due to a reaction with an organic cat-litter type substance used as a packaging material. The leak occurred after the laboratory switched from an inorganic to an organic litter substance, but this switch has not yet been confirmed as the cause of the incident. The precise location of all of the drums was not confirmed. A pair of the barrels were stored at the underground waste plant, which was in the process of receiving thousands of barrels of waste from Los Alamos when it was closed as a result of the leak. Some of the containers were transferred to a commercial waste dump in Andrews, Texas, for temporary storage.

The underground plant at Carlsbad is the U.S. government's only permanent repository for low-level nuclear waste.

NBC News said the Los Alamos Laboratory, as a precautionary measure, has temporarily stored barrels still at its site in special containers, moving them under a dome with a fire protection system with systems for monitoring possible accumulations of heat.