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Move mercury with care

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Somerset County residents and officials are impatient. The federal government assured them two years ago that thousands of tons of toxic mercury, long stored at a Hillsborough Township depot, would be gone by now.

Instead, the hazardous stockpile still sits at the 77-acre Bellemead property, with no set date for when it will be shipped to a Nevada Army facility.

Hillsborough Mayor Anthony Ferrera is correct when he says the delay has occurred because "Nevada is dragging its feet." But like it or not, Nevada officials had good reason to do so.

Nevada environmental officials were doing their job and the right thing when they raised roadblocks to the transfer plan shortly after it was announced.

The Nevada officials demanded, and got, a serious review of procedures, equipment, training and risks associated with the cross-country movement of the mercury. And a team of military experts has been inspecting every one of the 75,880 flasks of mercury in Hillsborough, looking for potential leaks and weaknesses in the 50-year-old-plus containers.

All these steps are reasonable and should have been done well before military and elected officials ebulliently told Somerset residents in 2006 that victory over the mercury storage was at hand.

Sure, no one wants the toxic substance hanging around New Jersey a day longer than necessary. But citizens here, in Nevada and everywhere in between cannot take a chance that the dangerous material will spill or escape while being moved. That would be disastrous.

Hillsborough committee member Carl Suraci has the best take on the delay: Had the mercury been moving from Nevada to New Jersey, Ferrara and Garden State leaders would have demanded every possible safeguard. It is silly to criticize another state for doing the same.

Moving mercury in aging containers is dangerous business. It is far more important to do it right than to do it quickly.

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