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State, feds: Resolve dispute over WIPP

For a state so heavily on the federal dole, New Mexico is behaving rather cavalierly toward Washington with its demands on the Department of Energy regarding the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant.

The state Environment Department is demanding more than \$100 million in financial assurance by Westinghouse and other WIPP contractors to cover the eventual cost of closing the facility when it's filled with low-level nuclear trash.

State bureaucrats' concern for the future of WIPP may be commendable, but the project is a federal one. If anyone should be demanding surety bonds or such, it's DOE. At any rate, Uncle Sam can be counted on to be sure the job is done right.

But meanwhile, Energy Secretary Bill Richardson is pronouncing himself fed up with New Mexico's demands.

You want that \$100 million assurance? Fine, says the former New Mexico congressman; we'll give it to you. To pay for it, DOE will withhold \$20 million a year in WIPP-route highway funds. Congress already has given DOE permission to do so.

The state is supposed to receive \$300 million over 15 years to pay for a safe route between Los Alamos National Laboratory and the WIPP site near Carlsbad. Most of that roadwork is done — but DOE money is being counted on to pay some of the costs of widening U.S. 84/285 between Santa Fe and Pojoaque and to cover some improvements to U.S. 70 near Las Cruces.

State highway engineers say the U.S. 84/285 work now going on at Pojoaque would continue. However, widening that road all the way to Santa Fe had been a priority project. That work could be stalled — and for no good reason: In matters nuclear, the federal government is in far better position than an undermanned state agency to assure environmental safety. The WIPP contract is between DOE and its contractors. New Mexico may be host to WIPP — but so is the United States of America. WIPP's security is a national concern — a valid national concern, given the federal penchant for foul-ups, but one superseding that of a state government.

Gov. Gary Johnson should look past Secretary Richardson's ransoming of highway support to the intergovernmental issues being raised by this state intrusion. Johnson, in short, should call off his dogs. The secretary, for his part, should listen to New Mexico officials' concerns and offer politically binding assurance that all phases of WIPP will be as environmentally harmless as possible.

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