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► **Commentary**

# The facts on characterizing WIPP waste

The U.S. Department of Energy is cleaning up 23 of its transuranic waste sites across the United States by safely and permanently disposing of it at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, or WIPP. About 97 percent of all transuranic waste destined for WIPP is at five DOE sites. The remaining 3 percent is stored in small quantities at 18 locations across the country. Recent fires near Los Alamos National Laboratory, the Hanford Site in Washington, and the Idaho Engineering and Environmental Laboratory, emphasize the need to remove this waste from temporary surface storage.



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As part of this effort, DOE is proposing to perform certain waste characterization at the generator sites for transportation and at WIPP for final disposal. Characterization comprises the processes to identify and describe contents of waste containers. Once the waste is characterized, under the watchful eye of the New Mexico Environment Department, it will be permanently disposed of at WIPP.

This proposal would not "cut corners," nor would it increase risk to human health or the environment.

The initiative will allow faster cleanup of sites; save taxpayers millions of dollars by eliminating the need to build multiple waste characterization facilities at sites with small quantities of waste; and make it easier for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the New Mexico Environment Department to regulate the waste characterization process.

## How centralized characterization will work

Before any of this waste can be disposed of at WIPP, it must be characterized to ensure that it meets regulatory requirements for disposal established by NMED and EPA. The cost of constructing multiple characterization facilities is prohibitive, so DOE is pursuing this proposal.

Late last month, DOE proposed to modify the existing hazardous waste facility permit for WIPP. This modification would lay the groundwork for waste characterization at WIPP. This initiative involves characterizing waste at generator sites to meet transportation requirements prior to sending it to WIPP. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Department of Transportation regulate these activities.

Currently, waste sites perform three characterization processes: First to meet hazardous waste regulations imposed by their respective states, second to meet transportation requirements, and third to demonstrate compliance for final disposal at WIPP. That final process involves sampling, analysis, and testing to confirm documented identification of the hazardous characteristics of the waste. DOE's proposal does not change the process, it merely seeks to perform the final disposal characterization at WIPP.

This final step confirms the processes performed at the generator sites, while ensuring the waste meets disposal requirements of WIPP's hazardous waste facility permit.

The characterization processes required for transportation to WIPP are designed to detect prohibited items and keep them from being shipped. These processes will still be performed at the generator sites prior to being shipped to WIPP. In the unlikely event that an item prohibited from disposal, such as an aerosol can in a waste drum, is missed by one of the generator sites and inadvertently sent to WIPP, DOE would deal with that item in accordance with the permit. Materials that cannot be disposed of at WIPP will be sent to an appropriate facility outside of New Mexico. This proposal strengthens NMED's ability to regulate waste disposal at WIPP.

NMED will have around-the-clock access to the WIPP facility to observe and evaluate the characterization activities. It does not increase the potential for accidents that would pose a threat to public health and safety or the environment.

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As part of this proposal, DOE has requested permission to increase storage capacity and eliminate a 60-day time limit for aboveground storage. DOE is asking for a 25 percent increase in temporary surface storage (from the current limit of 585 drum equivalents to a limit of 732 drum equivalents) and ample time to complete final characterization and disposal. There will never be a time when more than 732 waste drum equivalents are stored on the surface at WIPP.

One of the steps DOE must complete before it can proceed with this initiative is to gain approval from NMED. The public has until Sept. 26 to send NMED comments on this proposal. Public meetings will also be held Aug. 29 in Carlsbad and Aug. 31 in Santa Fe. Additional information can be obtained by calling the WIPP Information Center at 1-800-336-9477, or by visiting the WIPP Web site at [www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us](http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us).

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