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Feds back away from request for local inspections

Public comment cited as one reason for temporary withdrawal

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CARLSBAD — Federal officials temporarily withdrew a request for permission to inspect shipping containers for their content at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant instead of where the shipments originate.

Citing public comment as one reason why the modification requests were withdrawn, Energy Department Field Office Manager Fran Triay announced the withdrawal to Steve Zappe, New Mexico Environment Department’s WIPP project manager, in a letter dated Sept. 29.

It is too early to comment on what changes will be made to the permit modification requests and why the requests were withdrawn specifically, but public comment did play a role, Dennis Hurt, Energy Department spokesman, said.

"We do listen and we do care about the public comment," he said.

The requests submitted July 21, 2000, asked NMED to allow WIPP officials to increase the storage capacity at the WIPP, eliminate waste storage time constraints and allow WIPP officials to characterize waste once it is received at the WIPP.

"After reviewing these comments and further considering the verbal comments made by your staff, DOE has decided that withdrawal of the Class 2 Modification Request as submitted is appropriate," the letter states.

When DOE officials announce the permit modification request is available for public review, the public comment period starts all over again, Zappe said.

Everyone who sent in public comments with their name and address will receive notification of the new public comment hearings, Zappe said.

NMED has 90 days from the date the modification requests are filed to either approve the modifications, approve the modifications providing certain changes are made to them, deny the modifications, declare the permit modifications are Class 3 and must follow Class 3 modification procedures, or to ask for a 90-day extension, Zappe said.

Part of the original DOE request asked for authorization to begin the modifications immediately, without a public comment period. This request was denied by NMED in early September.

A letter from Gregory J. Lewis, director of NMED’s Water, Hazardous Waste and Waste Management Division, to the DOE and Westinghouse Waste Isolation Division announced the denial.

At the time, NMED officials said they had questions they wanted answered before making a final decision on the modifications.

Zappe said he does not know why DOE officials withdrew the permit modification requests.

The WIPP Hazardous Waste Facility Permit was issued Oct. 27, 1999 and became effective Nov. 26, 1999, Zappe said.