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For Immediate Release

DOE to Hold Meetings on Proposed Permit Modification Regarding Centralized Waste Confirmation Facility

CARLSBAD, N.M., June 6, 2001 – The public is invited to comment on a proposed modification to the Hazardous Waste Facility Permit for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP). Submittal of the proposed modification to the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) begins a formal review process that includes a 60-day public comment period and public information meetings.

The proposed permit modification contains revisions made as a result of meetings with NMED officials and review of written public comments. The original proposed modification was submitted to NMED July 24, 2000, and withdrawn September 29, 2000, to address comments from the public and NMED. The subsequent proposed modification was submitted today.

In the request, DOE proposes several changes to its hazardous waste facility permit, which will allow some of the required waste characteristic confirmation activities to be performed at the WIPP facility. One concern expressed by the public relates to how WIPP will deal with prohibited items at the central confirmation facility. Receipt of prohibited items at WIPP will be a rare occurrence; nonetheless, a clear path for managing the possibility has been developed. If prohibited items are identified during confirmation at the WIPP facility, these items will be managed in a safe and legal manner which may include on-site management, off-site treatment and/or disposal, and/or returning the prohibited item to the generator/storage site.

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Under the terms of the existing permit and the proposed modification, only waste adequately characterized in accordance with current regulations will be shipped to WIPP. The requested modification allows the confirmation step to occur at WIPP, rather than at the site that generated the waste. This confirmatory analysis at WIPP would be used in lieu of building expensive analytical facilities at sites with small inventories of transuranic waste. The other changes relate to storage locations, volumes, and durations to accommodate waste confirmation activities at WIPP. This initiative is a safe and efficient option for accelerating cleanup of DOE sites nationwide.

Waste characterization is the process of identifying and describing the physical, chemical, and radiological properties of transuranic waste. DOE uses this information to determine whether the waste meets regulatory requirements for transportation to WIPP. Confirmation is the process of verifying the characterization data and ensures that waste meets the specific disposal criteria defined in the permit.

The proposed modification conforms to industry standards for handling hazardous materials and does not compromise the safety of the facility, its employees, or the public.

DOE issued a revised Record of Decision (ROD) for the Department of Energy's Waste Management Program: Treatment and Storage of Transuranic Waste in December 2000. The original ROD was issued on January 23, 1998. In the revision to the ROD, DOE has established the capability at WIPP to prepare for disposal up to 1,250 cubic meters of contact-handled transuranic (CH-TRU) waste out of about 7,000 cubic meters expected to be received annually for disposal at WIPP.

Informational meetings are scheduled for July 17 in Carlsbad and July 19 in Santa Fe. Both informational meetings will consist of two sessions — 3-5 p.m. and 6-8 p.m. The meeting in Carlsbad will be held at the WIPP Information Center, Skeen-Whitlock Building, 4021 National Parks Highway. The Santa Fe meeting will take place at the Courtyard by Marriott, 3347 Cerrillos Road. Individuals attending the public information meetings will be provided envelopes addressed to NMED for use in submitting written comments. Written comments will be accepted through August 13.

All written comments must be sent to Mr. Steve Zappe, New Mexico Environment Department, 2905 Rodeo Park Drive, Building E, Santa Fe, NM 87505. Mr. Zappe is also accepting comments by e-mail at steve_zappe@nmenv.state.nm.us, or he can be reached by telephone at (505) 428-2517.

The public can obtain more information on the proposed permit modification by logging onto the WIPP Home Page, <http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us>, and from the WIPP Information Center, 4021 National Parks Highway, Carlsbad, or phone 1-800-336-WIPP (9477). Comments to the permittees relative to this permit modification should be submitted to Mr. Bobby St. John, P.O. Box 2078, Carlsbad, NM 88221, by August 6. Additionally, information on WIPP's compliance with the permit can be obtained from NMED.

WIPP, a cornerstone of DOE's cleanup effort, is the nation's first repository for the permanent disposal of defense-generated transuranic radioactive waste left from research and production of nuclear weapons.

Located in southeastern New Mexico, 26 miles east of Carlsbad, project facilities include disposal rooms excavated in an ancient, stable salt formation 2,150 feet (almost one-half mile) underground. Waste disposal operations began at WIPP March 26, 1999.

Transuranic waste consists of clothing, tools, rags, debris, residues, and other disposable items contaminated with radioactive elements, mostly plutonium.