



State of New Mexico

Office of the Governor

Bill Richardson
Governor

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Governor Bill Richardson acts to prevent high-level Waste at WIPP

SANTA FE – Governor Bill Richardson today said he will take action to prevent high-level waste from being shipped to the WIPP facility in New Mexico.

Governor Richardson delivered the following remarks today during a news conference:

Thank you for being here today.

As many of you are aware, despite losing in federal court, the U.S. Department of Energy recently asked Congress to grant it the power to reclassify its own radioactive waste. DOE wants to re-label "high-level" waste as "low-level" and either leave it in the ground or send it to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad.

I want to make my position clear: I will not allow high-level waste in New Mexico – no matter what new name DOE comes up with to characterize it. As Congressman and Secretary of Energy, the safety of New Mexicans was my top concern. As Governor, it remains my top priority.

This waste would be no different than it was before. Waste that has been defined as high-level for decades would suddenly become low-level on DOE's whim.

To make sure that New Mexico's concerns are addressed, I have ordered New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry to amend WIPP's state permit to specifically forbid any reclassified high-level waste from coming to WIPP. WIPP was not designed or permitted to handle high-level waste, no matter what you call it.

This is about so much more than a fight over labels on drums. It is about promises that were made to the people of New Mexico when WIPP opened, and making sure those promises are kept. The promise was clear-cut – WIPP would only accept transuranic waste, period.

If DOE is granted the power to reclassify its own waste and nothing is done to prevent it from going to WIPP, estimates are that approximately 15,000 high-level drums could be sent there. In these drums would be a toxic sludge, the leftovers from decades of weapons production in Idaho, South Carolina and Washington State. This sludge is the very definition of high-level waste. The court agrees. A federal circuit court judge ruled this summer that any DOE effort to summarily reclassify its waste would violate the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982.

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The DOE has said time and again, most recently in a Saturday Op-Ed in the Albuquerque Journal, that it does not intend to send high-level waste to WIPP. While I hope this is true, I know that the action I have announced today will ensure they stand by their word.

I have a personal connection to WIPP. I opened the facility only after I was confident that environmental safeguards would be met. This action will help make sure that those agreements are lived up to, now and in the future.

The DOE is a vital part of this state's economy and culture. We appreciate the work that the Department's employees, in Los Alamos, Albuquerque and Carlsbad, do every day. But we need to make sure that decisions that are being made at DOE's highest policy levels reflect what is best for New Mexico.

I am pleased to say that I have spoken to both Senators Domenici and Bingaman and both agree with me and oppose DOE's effort to reclassify high-level waste.

Safety will not be compromised.

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