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DOE Completes Disposal Operations In Panel 5 of the WIPP Underground

CARLSBAD, N.M., August 15, 2011 – The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) announced that disposal operations in Panel 5 of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) underground repository are complete. Last month, the final contact-handled transuranic (CH-TRU) waste shipment was emplaced in the panel, which took just over two years to fill.

“All TRU waste management employees at WIPP and at the generator sites deserve the credit for this accomplishment,” National TRU Program Director J.R. Stroble said. “It is through their dedication to performing their jobs safely, compliantly and timely that WIPP and the TRU Waste Management Program continues to be a success for DOE.”

The WIPP underground is configured for 10 panels. Panels one through eight have seven disposal rooms. Each disposal room measures 33 feet wide, 13 feet high and 300 feet long and can hold approximately 10,000, 55-gallon drums of waste. Approximately 44 percent of the 6.2 million cubic feet of TRU waste permitted by the Land Withdrawal Act, which was signed in 1992, has been disposed of in the WIPP underground.

With disposal operations in Panel 5 now complete, the WIPP underground now has the equivalent of about four football fields stacked 13 feet high with TRU waste.

Operations personnel will now isolate the area from the rest of the WIPP underground by constructing a brick and mortar isolation wall.

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“For all steps of national TRU waste disposal operations --from the TRU waste shipment preparations conducted at the generator sites, through interstate transportation, and permanent disposal -- everyone involved should be pleased with their contributions in moving WIPP one step closer to completing the overall mission of safely cleaning up all legacy TRU waste from around the country,” Interim CBFO Manager Ed Ziemianski said.

WIPP is a DOE facility designed to safely isolate defense-related transuranic waste from people and the environment. Waste stored at TRU waste sites around the country is shipped to WIPP and permanently disposed in rooms mined out of an ancient salt formation 2,150 feet below the surface. WIPP is located 26 miles outside of Carlsbad, N.M.

CH-TRU waste can be handled by workers without any other additional shielding than the container itself. Remote-handled (RH) TRU waste emits more penetrating radiation than CH waste and must be handled with remote-handling equipment and transported in lead-shielded casks. CH waste disposal operations began in 1999 while RH-TRU waste disposal began in 2007.

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