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U.S. Department of Energy
Carlsbad Field Office
Waste Isolation Pilot Plant
P.O. Box 3090
Carlsbad, New Mexico 88221

Media Contact:
Bradley Bugger
U.S. DOE Carlsbad Field Office
(575) 234-7309

www.wipp.energy.gov

WIPP UPDATE: Contrary to Rumor, There Is No Evacuation

Internet Rumors About Safety Concerns Are Inaccurate

An Internet rumor has been fueling concerns this week about the need to be prepared to evacuate southeastern New Mexico because of recent events at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant. There is absolutely no basis for these rumors. Monitoring conducted by Nuclear Waste Partnership of air, soil, water and vegetation are showing no radiation releases that would approach levels causing health concerns. Independent monitoring by the Carlsbad Environmental Monitoring and Research Center has reached similar conclusions. (You can view CEMRC's monitoring data at CEMRC.org). In a recent letter to New Mexico's senators, Ron Curry, regional administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency, noted that "initial field measurements combined with modeling of potential public exposures indicate that it is very unlikely that any exposures would approach regulatory limits or represent a public health concern." The regularly-scheduled town meeting on Thursday at 5:30 p.m. at the Carlsbad City Council Chambers will include a detailed discussion of the results of all the environmental monitoring data we have collected to date.

Safety Inspections of Mine Shafts Are Next Step in Recovery Process

A package of work and safety controls required before safe re-entry can take place at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) has been prepared by Nuclear Waste Partnership, the management and operations contractor at WIPP. The package will be submitted to the Department of Energy for review and approval, the next step before sending personnel into the WIPP underground facility to understand the source of the recent radiation release.

The safety inspections of both the Salt Handling and Air Intake shafts, which require personnel to ride the mine hoist, or elevator, to the bottom of the shaft, will begin after WIPP receives DOE approval. This activity will then be followed by a second personnel entry into the mine to assure a safe route between

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the Salt Handling and Air Intake shafts, and to ensure two exits from the mine. The third entry will be made to identify the source of the radioactive contamination.

National Experts Bring Skills to WIPP

The Department of Energy and Global Management & Operations Services (GMOS), a division of URS, and parent company to Nuclear Waste Partnership, have engaged experts across the nation to support WIPP recovery efforts.

DOE and the Mine Safety and Health Administration have mobilized experts to supplement the Carlsbad Field Office in key areas, including nuclear operations, ventilation systems, nuclear safety and mine safety.

DOE's Savannah River Site sent a team of radiological control technicians, who will re-enter the mine with experienced WIPP personnel to isolate and mitigate the source of underground contamination.

Idaho National Laboratory provided a plutonium event recovery expert and additional radiological equipment.

Los Alamos National Laboratory provided a high efficiency air particulate (HEPA) filters specialist.

URS-CH2M Oak Ridge, contractor at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, brought radiological cleanup expertise to WIPP.

MJW Corporation provided experts in occupational and radiation medicine and health physics.

And URS Global Management and Operations Services sent resource management, recovery personnel and experts in documented safety analysis; robotics; environmental, health and safety management; communications and web page design.

These are but a few of the resources assembled to help WIPP recovery efforts. The Mine Safety and Health Administration and other federal and state agencies are working hand-in-hand to ensure the safety of workers, the public and the environment as WIPP recovery plans progress.

Bob McQuinn Addresses NWP Employees

Bob McQuinn, who will lead Nuclear Waste Partnership through WIPP recovery efforts, addressed NWP employees at a March 17 all-hands meeting. McQuinn expressed confidence that WIPP will recover from February's fire and radiological event. He discussed the challenges that lie ahead in coming weeks and asked for the employees' support as WIPP transitions from recovery to restart of operations.

McQuinn brings 35 years of experience in DOE nuclear and hazard operations to WIPP. NWP manages and operates the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant for the U.S. Department of Energy.

Community Meetings Scheduled

March 17 – A WIPP representative will update the Hobbs City Commission at 6:00 p.m. on WIPP recovery activities. Location: 200 E. Broadway, Hobbs

March 25 - A WIPP representative will update the Artesia City Council at 7:00 p.m. on WIPP recovery activities. Location: 511 W. Texas Ave., Artesia

Carlsbad Mayor Dale Janway and DOE will co-host a meeting Thursday, March 20, to feature updates on WIPP recovery activities. The meetings will be held every Thursday at 5:30 p.m. at the Carlsbad City Council Chambers, 101 N. Halagueno Street.