House OKs WIPP

By KATIE HICKOX
Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON — The House by a voice vote on Tuesday approved legislation to open a New Mexico nuclear waste repository — but the historic bill could die at the hands of an angry Western senator.

The $1.2 billion Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, set to be the nation's first transuranic waste repository, is carved into salt deposits 2,150 feet below the southeastern New Mexico desert near Carlsbad. The 880,000 barrels of waste slated for burial at WIPP consist of plutonium-tainted tools and clothing from the nation's nuclear weapons factories.

The House passed legislation that would remove 10,240 acres of land surrounding WIPP from public use, a key step needed to open the repository for a five- to seven-year period of experiments with 4,400 barrels of nuclear waste.

The bill would forbid the federal government from opening WIPP until regulations governing the safety of radioactive waste underground for 10,000 years are issued. The Environmental Protection Agency also must approve the Department of Energy's test plan and strategy to retrieve waste in the event of an accident before the repository can be opened for experiments.

The law would require the federal government to pay New Mexico $20 million a year for 15 years after WIPP opens.

But the WIPP bill in its current form — the product of two years of congressional haggling and a lawsuit — could die in two days.

Nevada Democratic Sen. Richard Bryan has placed a legislative "hold" on the bill, precluding the Senate from voting on the bill. Nevada is home to Yucca Mountain, the site of a proposed high-level nuclear waste dump.

"There is a real live... probability that this bill will get killed after all of our work," said Sen. Pete V. Domenici...
Jemez bill dead for now, or is it?

By JAY HARRISON
The New Mexico State Journal

The New Mexico legislature has rejected the Jemez bill, but the New Mexico Public Service Commission has not yet made a decision on the case.

The bill, sponsored by Rep. Pete V. Domenici, R-N.M., would have increased the rate of the Jemez bill by 10 percent for the next three years. The bill was introduced on the first day of the legislative session and was referred to the House Natural Resources Committee.

Domenici, a member of the House Appropriations Committee, said the bill was necessary to cover the cost of operations at the Jemez power plant, which is owned by the New Mexico Public Service Commission.

The bill was hotly debated in committee, with arguments on both sides. Some argued that the Jemez bill should be increased to cover the cost of operations, while others argued that the bill was too high and would disproportionately affect low-income consumers.

The bill was eventually killed in committee, with a vote of 7-3 in favor of killing the bill. The vote was narrow, with one vote to break a tie.

However, the New Mexico Public Service Commission has not yet made a decision on the case. The commission is expected to make a decision in the coming weeks.