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For Immediate Release

WIPP Training Proves Effective in Responding to Commercial Radiological Spill

CARLSBAD, N.M., May 6 -- Officials from the Wyoming Emergency Management Agency have high praise for the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and Westinghouse Electric Corporation following a recent radiological spill involving a commercial transportation carrier.

"The WIPP (Waste Isolation Pilot Plant) training program is excellent," said Chuck Fraley, radiological response team leader for the state of Wyoming, who was at the scene of the spill near Laramie, Wyo. "The training performed under the DOE contract along U.S. Interstate 80 proved to be effective for the local responders. They knew exactly what they could and could not do. We had little to do when we arrived on the scene, which is a tribute to the training provided by the DOE and Westinghouse."

On March 31, 1996, the Wyoming Highway Patrol was notified of a spill involving a radiological material. Using training provided by the DOE, the Laramie Fire Department effectively secured the area near the spill and assisted as radiological team members from the commercial carrier repackaged a container that was leaking an oily substance.

(Note: This was commercial radioactive waste in a commercial carrier. Neither the waste nor the carrier is connected with the WIPP).

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Fraley said local responders use the WIPP training to reduce the risk of any possible safety threat to the public or environment. "Obviously, this isn't the first time that we have responded to a spill like this," said the Wyoming emergency official. "Having locals trained as first responders makes our (the state of Wyoming) job easier. This is an effective use of taxpayer dollars to ensure public safety."

Since 1988, the DOE and Westinghouse, the management and operating contractor at the WIPP, have worked with states along proposed transuranic waste shipping routes to ensure emergency response personnel are adequately trained. No waste is currently being shipped.

The WIPP States Training and Education Program (STEP) has provided instruction for more than 10,000 emergency response professionals in 12 states. STEP training focuses on response to potential accidents involving WIPP waste shipments. Classroom instruction includes caring for accident victims, guarding the public welfare, protecting the environment, and ensuring the safety of responders.

As part of its training, the DOE provides six courses including first responder, first responder refresher, command and control, mitigation, train-the-trainer, and medical management. As required by federal law, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration reviewed and certified the STEP in 1993.

Laramie emergency response personnel have received the first responder and first responder refresher courses. Both courses are intended for the first

emergency people arriving at an accident scene. Emergency response actions and responder decontamination at the accident site are among the skills taught in the courses. First responders include members of fire and police departments and emergency medical services.

Administered by the DOE's Carlsbad Area Office, the WIPP is designed to permanently dispose of transuranic radioactive waste left from the research and production of nuclear weapons. The WIPP is 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 half a mile) underground. Transuranic waste consists of clothing, tools, rags, and other disposable items contaminated with trace amounts of radioactive elements, mostly plutonium.

The DOE is working to get the WIPP licensed for operation through a permitting process with the New Mexico Environment Department and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. When the DOE meets all applicable regulatory requirements, the Secretary of Energy will decide in October 1997 whether to operate the WIPP as the nation's first underground nuclear waste repository. A positive decision by the Secretary will mean that waste shipments from 23 storage/generator sites could begin in April 1998.

Shipments of transuranic waste from the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory near Idaho Falls and the Hanford Site near Richland, Wash., will travel through Wyoming on Interstate 80 en route to the WIPP.

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