

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY
CARLSBAD AREA OFFICE
WASTE ISOLATION PILOT PLANT
P. O. BOX 3090
CARLSBAD, NEW MEXICO 88221

RECEIVED

JUL 24 1996

Media Contact:

Patty Baratti-Sallani

U.S. Department of Energy Carlsbad Area Office
(505) 234-7313

Dan Balduini

Westinghouse Waste Isolation Division
(505) 234-8658

DOENEWS:

For Immediate Release

DOE Carlsbad Area Office Disputes GAO Report

CARLSBAD, N.M., July 24 -- U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Carlsbad Area Office Manager George Dials today issued a statement regarding the General Accounting Office (GAO) report entitled, "Nuclear Waste: Uncertainties About Opening Waste Isolation Pilot Plant" (WIPP). "The details contained in the actual GAO report do not support the unnecessarily negative and pessimistic summary described in recent news reports," Dials said.

"The DOE is positive and optimistic about the WIPP Program," Dials said. "WIPP is on schedule to open by April 1998. All necessary experimental activities have been completed. There are no uncertainties about the work we need to perform. The final Compliance Certification Application is being readied for submittal to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in October 1996. The GAO's concern about the schedule reflects its failure to acknowledge the 100 percent success rate we have to date in accomplishing scheduled activities and milestones."

Officials at the Idaho Nuclear Engineering Laboratory (INEL), the first storage/generator site scheduled to ship transuranic waste to the WIPP, say they are ready to meet the schedule under an agreement between the DOE and the state of Idaho.

Warren W. Bergholz, Jr., deputy manager of the DOE's Idaho Operations Office said that the INEL will be ready to ship waste to WIPP as soon as it opens. "We are confident that WIPP will open on schedule, and the INEL remains committed to shipping waste out of Idaho under that timetable," said Bergholz.

-More-



Printed on recycled paper

960723



DOE Disputes GAO Report

-2-

The GAO states two main reasons for its pessimism: 1) disparity between the contents of the DOE's draft Compliance Certification Application and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) regulations and related criteria, and 2) as of May 1996, the DOE had not completed the scientific activities needed to prepare a complete compliance package.

As for the "disparity" between the DOE's draft application and the EPA's regulations and criteria, the Carlsbad Area Office submitted its draft application in March 1995, only two months after EPA's issuance of the draft criteria and well in advance of the agency's publication of the final criteria in February 1996. The areas of the draft application noted as "incomplete" by the GAO were areas clearly noted by the Carlsbad Area Office in its transmittal letter that accompanied the draft application.

"Submitting the draft application early enabled us to gain meaningful comments from the EPA and stakeholders and incorporate those comments into our final Compliance Certification Application in a timely fashion," said Dials. "We are confident that handling the application in this way will ultimately result in the best possible quality of input to the final application that we will submit to the EPA, as scheduled, in October 1996. We are equally confident that the EPA will be able to complete its work in a timely manner."

The Carlsbad Area Office is currently submitting chapters of the final Compliance Certification Application to the EPA for review as they are developed. Five of the eight chapters have already been submitted.

In correspondence and testimony presented to the U.S. Congress, EPA officials stated that once the WIPP's compliance certification application is determined to be complete, the EPA is prepared to finish its review of the application within one year.

Dials also noted that the necessary scientific research and development activities performed by the project's scientific advisor, Sandia National Laboratories, were completed in March 1996 for input to the performance assessment process. The scientific evaluation and analysis of this data was completed in June 1996.

-More-

DOE Disputes GAO Report

-3-

Dr. Wendell D. Weart, Sandia National Laboratories Senior Scientist for Nuclear Waste Management Programs, said a systems performance analysis was conducted in 1995 to determine which experiments were critical to demonstrating compliance with the EPA standards. "Those critical experiments were pursued and completed, and they provide an adequate basis to show compliance with the EPA requirements. The results of our work are now being prepared for inclusion in the final compliance application," Weart stated.

The GAO report also says the limited number of available shipping containers (TRUPACT-IIs) and the lack of waste preparation facilities and equipment at the generator/storage sites will constrain waste shipping and emplacement operations.

"What the GAO missed in this regard is that we are taking a cost-effective, phased approach to shipping and waste emplacement," Dials said. "This approach is designed to reduce the cost of the transuranic waste system to the American public by purchasing TRUPACT-IIs in time to meet the opening of shipping routes across the nation and by investing in mobile waste preparation systems for use at the sites in place of constructing expensive facilities that the GAO assumes will be required."

Dials also said that he expects no delays in the program that would lengthen the estimated 35-year disposal phase of the WIPP. Furthermore, the cost of continued temporary storage of transuranic waste at the generator/storage sites far exceeds the cost of permanent disposal at WIPP.

"It is unfortunate that the GAO chose to ignore our overall success at meeting our aggressive schedule, and that we are doing so in a very cost-effective manner," Dials said. "It is environmentally irresponsible to prolong temporary storage of transuranic waste at numerous locations throughout the United States when we have the WIPP facility ready to meet its regulatory requirements and on schedule to open by April 1998."

-More

DOE Disputes GAO Report**-4-**

The WIPP is designed to permanently dispose of transuranic radioactive waste left from the research and production of nuclear weapons. 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 such items contaminated with trace amounts of radioactive elements, mostly plutonium.

-30-**037DR0796**