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NM Environment Secretary Confirms: WIPP Seepage No Hazard To Health or Environment

New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Mark Weidler visited the WIPP site last week and concluded that no health or environmental threat is posed by lead-tainted salt water seeping into one of the mine's exhaust shafts.

Weidler inspected the shaft last Wednesday to determine what, if any, risks to the environment the seepage poses, as well as to determine if the salt water situation will compromise WIPP's ability to store transuranic and mixed wastes.

"The water is 2,150 feet underground, and it's much saltier than sea water. It's certainly not drinking water," Weidler said.

The water, averaging 1014 gallons per week, is currently being pumped from the bottom of the exhaust shaft and disposed of commercially at a Treatment Storage Disposal Facility in Deep Water, New Jersey.

Noting that the Environment Department and the US Department of Energy are monitoring the amount and makeup of the waste, Weidler concluded, "There's a tight rein on this situation."

Neither the lead nor the water will impact WIPP's scheduled opening in April, 1998. Ultimately, the shaft will be closed and completely sealed once WIPP is decommissioned, permanently blocking any water from reaching the disposal area.

The salt water, or brine, was first discovered in June, 1995, and it is thought to be caused primarily by water vapor condensing in the shaft. Additionally, a small amount of water seeps through a crack in the shaft's concrete liner.

The water becomes salty as it moves through the vertical passageway and is thought to take on lead as it comes into contact with chain link fencing used for support. Other potential sources, such as lead wool packing behind the exhaust shaft liner, are also being evaluated.

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