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### For Immediate Release

## **House, Senate Amendments Eliminate Redundant Regulations, Speed Opening of WIPP**

CARLSBAD, N.M., September 12 -- The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) could begin shipping defense-generated transuranic waste to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) five months earlier than originally planned, saving taxpayers an estimated \$100 million.

George Dials, manager of the Carlsbad Area Office which oversees the WIPP and National Transuranic programs, said the Senate's passage of the conference report on the Fiscal Year 1997 Defense Authorization Bill is an important step toward a November 1997 shipping date, pending President Clinton's signature. The bill is expected to be sent to the President as early as next week. The opening of the WIPP for disposal operations remains, of course, dependent upon the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) certification of the project's compliance with environmental regulations.

"The passage of this bill is a very important event for the WIPP," said Dials. "It reaffirms the EPA's role as the independent regulator and further enhances the prospects for protecting the health and safety of the public by removing unnecessary administrative impediments to the opening of this critically important facility."

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On September 10, the Senate overwhelmingly (by a 73 to 26 vote) approved H.R. 3230, the conference report on the Defense Authorization Bill. The report contained House and Senate amendments to the 1992 WIPP Land Withdrawal Act that removed unnecessary bureaucratic red tape while ensuring the safety of the facility.

"The opening of the WIPP to dispose of defense-generated transuranic nuclear waste will represent real progress in closing the circle on the nation's nuclear waste problem," said Dials. "It enhances the ability of the DOE to effect real progress in the cleanup and decommissioning of numerous weapons complex facilities throughout the United States."

"At present, there are more than 30 million people, potentially at risk, living within a 50-mile radius of the various sites throughout the United States that are temporarily storing transuranic nuclear waste. The opening of the WIPP allows for the disposal of this waste 2,150 feet underground in a 250 million-year-old salt formation, thus eliminating the risk to the public and the accessible environment forever," added Dials.

Removing a 180-day waiting period (for waste shipments) after the DOE demonstrates compliance with EPA criteria is a key point of the amendments, which were jointly sponsored in the House by U.S. Representatives Joe Skeen (R-NM), Daniel Shaefer (R-CO), and Michael Crapo (R-ID), and in the Senate by U.S. Senators Larry Craig (R-ID), Dirk Kempthorne (R-ID), Pete Domenici (R-NM), Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), and Bennett Johnston (D-LA).

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**Other key components of the legislation include:**

- **The EPA will continue as the primary regulator of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant. Removing bureaucratic delays in no way infringes on the stringent regulatory requirements the DOE must meet in order to open the WIPP.**
- **The EPA will have one year to review the Compliance Certification Application, which DOE will submit by October 31, 1996.**
- **Upon EPA certification (expected in October 1997), the DOE will begin shipping transuranic waste in November 1997 (instead of April 1998).**
- **Congress exempted the DOE from the requirement to meet the "no migration" standard in the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act. The EPA agrees that the requirement is redundant to the more stringent radioactive waste disposal criteria, and that the exemption will not jeopardize the environment nor the public health and safety.**
- **New Mexico will receive \$20 million annually for 15 years when H.R. 3230 becomes law. The money will be used for infrastructure and road improvements.**

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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 disposable items contaminated with trace amounts of radioactive elements, mostly plutonium.

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