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**ENERGY DEPARTMENT TAKES FURTHER STEPS
 TO OPEN NEW MEXICO
 NUCLEAR WASTE REPOSITORY**

***Documents Available
 for Public Input and Regulatory Review***

The Department of Energy today publicly released two compliance documents that evaluate environmental impacts and seek regulatory approval for the Nation's first nuclear waste repository. A draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS II) on the New Mexico Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) evaluates new scientific information not available in studies completed in 1980 and 1990. The WIPP Compliance Certification Application submitted to the Environmental Protection Agency for review on October 29, provides extensive analysis demonstrating that the facility complies with federal disposal standards for transuranic waste. Transuranic waste consists of clothing, tools, rags and other disposable items contaminated with radioactive elements, mostly plutonium.

"Cleanup of Department of Energy sites around the country is a national problem. We are confident that WIPP will be a national solution. The ultimate success of waste disposal at WIPP will be enhanced by a rigorous EPA review and public participation in the environmental impact statement," said Secretary of Energy Hazel R. O'Leary.

The SEIS II includes new information about waste volumes, legislative revisions, changes in the truck transportation routes, and information on additional waste storage sites not addressed in previous studies. The Department of Energy will host a series of public meetings in early 1997 at eight locations near sites where waste is currently being stored and at Carlsbad, NM, near the WIPP site.

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"The department must resolve some important issues, and we invite the public to participate in final decisionmaking about waste treatment and transportation," said Al Alm, Assistant Secretary for Environmental Management. "The EPA application includes extensive engineering and scientific analysis that reinforces the department's confidence in the WIPP as a disposal site."

DOE's geological, hydrological, and climatic assessment of the site includes simulated interactions among the environment, the engineered systems and the waste over the next 10,000 years. It will take the EPA one year to review the application.

Comprehensive reviews from technical oversight groups have benefitted the project. These groups include the recent National Research Council study that validates the project as a viable solution for the permanent, safe disposal of transuranic waste, as well as the Governor's New Mexico Radioactive Waste Consultation Task Force and the Environmental Evaluation Group. Others providing input include the Western Governors Association and regulatory and transportation officials in affected states.

"These evaluations show what might happen in a multitude of situations. The department demonstrates in the EPA application that WIPP will be effective in protecting people and the environment. We believe the facility makes sense from cost and environmental standpoints," said George Dials, Manager of the Carlsbad Area Office, which oversees WIPP and national transuranic programs.

The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant 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 that is 2,150 feet (about half-a-mile) underground. Defense-generated transuranic waste is temporarily stored at 10 major generator/storage sites and several small quantity sites nationwide. The 10 major sites are Hanford Reservation, Washington; Idaho National Engineering Laboratory, Idaho; Rocky Flats Environmental Technology Site, Colorado; Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, California; Nevada Test Site, Nevada; Los Alamos National Laboratory, New Mexico; Argonne National Laboratory (East), Illinois; Mound, Ohio; Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Tennessee; and Savannah River Plant, South Carolina.

For further information and to obtain a calendar of the public hearings or a copy of the draft SEIS II, the public can call the WIPP information line at 1-800-336-9477. Fact sheets are also available by calling fax on demand at 202/586-0550.

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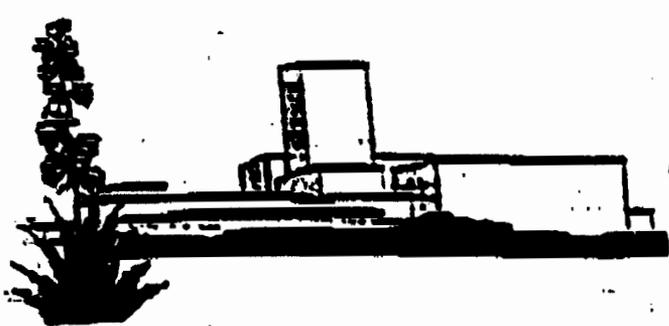
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