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DOENEWS

For Immediate Release

DOE Responds to NAS Recommendations to Increase Confidence in WIPP's Performance

CARLSBAD, N.M., November 27 -- The U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Carlsbad Area Office is taking action on several recommendations made recently by a committee of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to enhance confidence in the long-term performance of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP).

Carlsbad Area Office Manager George Dials outlined the DOE's progress on the recommendations during a November 22 meeting in Albuquerque, N.M., with members of the NAS WIPP Committee.

"The DOE places great value on the nearly 20 years of scientific and technical oversight provided by the NAS," said Dials. "The DOE is committed to providing timely feedback to the panel members on our resolution of their recommendations to further ensure the long-term performance of the WIPP."

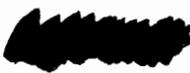
The report published by the National Research Council of the NAS, titled "*The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant: A Potential Solution for the Disposal of Transuranic Waste*," was issued on October 23. While the report expresses the NAS committee's confidence in the WIPP's ability to protect the public health and the environment for thousands of years, the committee makes several recommendations tied to reducing the consequences of potential future human intrusion during the 10,000-year regulatory period prescribed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The major recommendations and DOE's responses are:

- Speculative scenarios of human intrusion should not be used as the primary basis on which to judge the acceptability of WIPP.

The DOE agrees with this recommendation. However, the EPA requires the DOE to review all credible human intrusion scenarios. Only human intrusion might lead to a release of radioactivity, yet as the committee states, none of the scenarios results in a release above regulatory limits.

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- **Laboratory and on-site research programs could show that the potential is minimal for radioactive elements to dissolve in brine water and migrate beyond the repository boundary as a result of human intrusion.**

Experimental and field programs show that key parameters are well within the range required to reduce the impacts of human intrusion. Test results are included in the Compliance Certification Application submitted recently to the EPA. Ongoing studies of solubility and migration will further support the DOE's positions stated in the application.

- **Implementation of engineered options (compartmentalization of disposal rooms and treated backfill material) could substantially reduce the consequences of human intrusion.**

The DOE completed studies considering a large number of actions that could provide additional assurance against the consequences of human intrusion. As a result of these studies, panel seals and magnesium oxide as a backfill material have been chosen to control disposal room chemistry and to provide added assurance that the WIPP will comply with regulatory requirements.

"The results of these NAS committee suggested actions are already included in the Compliance Certification Application we submitted to the EPA on October 29, 1996. Ongoing scientific study programs also will enhance regulator and public confidence in the WIPP, and will reduce any uncertainty in our compliance calculations," Dials said. "These programs focus on hydrology, chemistry, room seals and rock mechanics, and overall performance assessment."

Future experiments will focus on maintaining compliance for recertification by the EPA every five years during disposal operations. Beyond that, the DOE will continue its work on the national and international levels to share technological developments that will assist in addressing the nuclear waste problem on a global basis.

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.

The WIPP is scheduled to begin waste disposal operations in November 1997.

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