

**University of New Mexico
Institute for Public Policy**

Steve Z
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*Dedicated to bringing
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Date: January 15, 1997
To: Margaret Card, Ralph Davis, Don Hancock, Les Shephard, Peter Swift,
Wendell Weart, Chris Wentz, & Steve Zappe
From: John Gastil & Hank Jenkins-Smith
Re: Participation in the WIPP focus groups

We are sending you a copy of the final report the IPP wrote on the WIPP focus groups we conducted last fall. Your participation made the focus groups a success and convinced us of the value of holding full-scale "Citizen Conferences" on public policy issues.

The EPA, however, chose not to hold Citizen Conferences on WIPP. Had they agreed to do so, we would have called on your expertise.

We thank you once again for your participation in the focus groups. We hope you found them as informative as we did.



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**A NARRATIVE SUMMARY OF THE
SEPTEMBER 1996 FOCUS GROUPS ON WIPP**

November, 1996

Prepared for
The Environmental Health Center

by the



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INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE

The University of New Mexico Institute for Public Policy (IPP) conducted a series of three focus groups in September 1996 for two reasons. The IPP sought to improve its understanding of how the New Mexico public understands the EPA's regulatory role with regard to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) and to test the public's capacity to participate in an innovative public meeting format later this year.

Both of these objectives connected to a larger project that the IPP has undertaken in conjunction with a research contract from the National Safety Council's Environmental Health Center (EHC). Through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the EHC developed a project that (a) probes the New Mexico public's knowledge of the WIPP oversight and regulatory process and (b) attempts to improve public understanding of that process. The IPP is assisting in the completion of this EHC project by providing focus group research and a statewide public opinion survey.

The focus groups were the first phase of the project because they could influence the design of both the telephone survey instrument and the public meetings. This dual role is reflected in the very structure of the focus groups. The first half of each focus group paralleled the structure of the survey questionnaire and gave researchers insight into the effectiveness of the preliminary survey questions. The first focus group was held before the survey began, and the focus group's results prompted the IPP to make minor revisions in the survey design. The second and third focus groups did not result in any changes in the survey instrument, but they did confirm the appropriateness of the survey questions.

The second half of each focus group tested the efficacy of innovative public meetings called Citizen Conferences. Deviating from the traditional focus group format, participants in each group had the opportunity to speak with four individuals intimately involved in the WIPP regulatory and oversight process. Participants then deliberated for a half-hour or more on a single question, "Should the New Mexico public place its trust in the existing WIPP oversight and regulatory process?" Like a jury, the focus group returned a verdict to the moderator and discussed why it had reached the decision(s) it had. This process was analogous to the planned format of the Citizen Conferences, and we studied this process to assess the quality of their interactions and deliberations.

METHOD

The WIPP focus groups were held in three New Mexico cities: Albuquerque (September 14), Santa Fe (September 28), and Roswell (September 29).¹ Together, these three areas represent much of the New Mexican cultural landscape, though not the unique features of the northwestern and southwestern corners of the state. Albuquerque holds roughly one-third of the New Mexico population and is the state's urban center. Northeast of Albuquerque, Santa Fe is also one of New Mexico's most urban areas, and it embodies both traditional New Mexican culture and a modern, new age sensibility often ascribed to the state. In the southeastern corner of the state, Roswell is located in the midst of a wide rural belt that extends along New Mexico's eastern and southern borders. Roswell is a small town with ties to ranching, agriculture, and the military. Located on the WIPP transportation route and not far from Carlsbad, Roswell was also selected because of its steady exposure to WIPP-related news and information.

For each focus group, eleven or twelve adults were recruited from lists of randomly-generated New Mexico telephone numbers. Each group of twelve was selected to fit within demographic and attitudinal parameters matching the region in which the focus group was held. To ensure a broad cross-section of participants, the IPP offered a \$100 stipend for participation, and 80% of those invited to attend chose to do so. Lower-than-usual attendance by men caused them to be underrepresented, but attitudinally, each focus group's initial views toward WIPP were representative of its respective county's views, as measured by several quarterly IPP surveys on WIPP.²

In addition to the participants, four individuals gave brief presentations at each focus group. These "representatives" each provided a different perspective on WIPP to the focus group participants, and each focus group had a different combination (and ordering) of representatives, listed in the order they appeared:

¹ The Albuquerque focus group was held in a focus group facility at the Institute for Public Policy. The Santa Fe focus group was held in a conference room at the Holiday Inn, and the Roswell focus group was held in a Best Western Sallyport Inn conference room. All three focus groups were observed by researchers and the afternoon speakers via a television monitor stationed in a room nearby.

² See Institute for Public Policy, *Unfinished Business: New Mexicans' Views on the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, 1990-1996* (Albuquerque: Institute for Public Policy, 1996).

Table 1. A List of Representatives at the WIPP Focus Groups

Albuquerque Focus Group

- Overview of WIPP Policy Environment. Hank Jenkins Smith, UNM Institute for Public Policy.
- Sandia/DoE Scientist. Wendell Weart, Senior Science Advisor for Sandia Nuclear Waste Management Programs.
- Environmental Activist. Don Hancock, Southwest Research & Information Center.
- NM Government Official. Ralph Davis, WIPP Emergency Medical Preparedness Coordinator for the New Mexico Department of Health.

Santa Fe Focus Group

- Sandia/DoE Scientist. Peter Swift, Research Scientist at Sandia National Labs.
- Environmental Activist. Margaret Card, Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety.
- NM Government Official. Steve Zappe, New Mexico Environmental Health Department.
- Overview of EPA Role. Joe Davis, Environmental Health Center.

Roswell Focus Group

- Overview of EPA Role. Joe Davis, Environmental Health Center.
- Environmental Activist. Don Hancock, Southwest Research & Information Center.
- Sandia/DoE Scientist. Les Shephard, Director of the Center for Nuclear Waste Management at Sandia National Laboratories.
- NM Government Official. Chris Wentz, Coordinator and Senior Policy Analyst for the New Mexico Radioactive Waste Consultation Task Force.

Before the focus group began, participants received name tags and signed a video consent form (to permit researchers to watch video tapes of the focus groups). Next, from the commencement of the focus group (about 10am) to 11:45 am, the focus group moderator led the participants through a traditional focus group, which began with knowledge and perception questions about WIPP, moved to a discussion of the EPA and its role in the WIPP regulatory and oversight process, and ended with participants examining a handful of EPA publications (see the Appendix for a full copy of the moderator script). From 11:45 to 12:30, participants ate a catered lunch, and after lunch, the focus group shifted into a trimmed-down Citizen Conference aimed at answering the question, “Should the New Mexico public place its trust in the existing WIPP oversight and regulatory process?” In succession, the four representatives introduced themselves and answered participant questions for twenty minutes. After the final representative had come and gone, the moderator helped participants reflect upon what they had heard, then asked the group to deliberate on its own for thirty to forty five minutes. Once the group had reached a unanimous verdict or a

deadlock, the moderator returned to a more active role and asked the participants questions about their verdicts.

At the conclusion of the focus group, participants were paid \$100 each, plus an optional travel reimbursement.³ Participants had the chance to speak further with any of the four representatives still in attendance, but formal participation concluded.

ORGANIZATION OF REPORT

The remainder of the report walks the reader through a discussion that parallels this focus group schedule. The first section reviews participants' initial understandings and views of WIPP. The second part reviews how participants viewed the EPA, and the third summarizes participant suggestions for revising EPA publications. The final sections review the insights gained from the three trial-run Citizen Conferences.

It is important to stress the research purpose of the following sections and how the focus groups provide a kind of data distinct from public opinion surveys. They report on the views of just 25 New Mexico citizens from three specific parts of the state. As is true for all other focus groups, these three WIPP focus groups should *not* be construed to be a population sample from which we may generalize to the state population. Instead, the observations of these focus groups should serve as rough guides toward understanding the *range* and *character* of public opinion in New Mexico. The IPP's random telephone survey will provide a general portrait of New Mexicans' opinions, but the focus groups will complement the survey by showing what those opinions *sound like* in the public's own words. The focus groups also hint at how public opinion might shift or solidify itself in the context of a public discussion, as opposed to a more private, telephone survey setting.

1. INITIAL KNOWLEDGE & PERCEPTIONS OF WIPP

KNOWLEDGE OF WIPP

Focus group participants had *all* heard of the WIPP facility and knew that it involved the transportation and storage of radioactive waste. Beyond that initial understanding, their knowledge varied considerably. Some Santa Fe participants were quite certain that WIPP eventually would store spent fuel rods from nuclear reactors, but they knew little about the details of WIPP's design and history. At the other extreme, Roswell participants knew a great deal about the facility. They talked about the transportation route, the shape of the waste canisters, the exact location of the facility, the concern about leakage into groundwater,

³ Travel reimbursement was offered to the Roswell participants because some drove as far as 70 miles to participate. An indication of the participants' appreciation of the focus group discussion is that only one participant accepted the \$20 reimbursement.

and the difficulty of opening WIPP. As one Roswell woman said, “We really don’t pay attention any more when they announce a projected opening date because they come and they go and they come and they go.”⁴

All three groups knew that the waste going to WIPP was coming from outside of New Mexico, and some participants named states such as Idaho, Washington, and Colorado. Some talked about waste coming from the East Coast, but states were not mentioned by name. Some participants also thought that wastes would come to WIPP from Los Alamos. Participants also knew that the waste would come to WIPP by trucks traveling along New Mexico’s interstates and highways.

Other details about WIPP’s history were known only by those participants who said they read the newspaper regularly or had some personal or professional connection to nuclear issues (e.g., a husband working at Sandia National Laboratories or a participant formerly working with nuclear technologies). One Albuquerque man knew a great deal about WIPP and spontaneously used the term “transuranic wastes,” a phrase that was new to most participants. A Santa Fe woman had read about the difficulty of marking the WIPP site in a manner that would last for 10,000 years. A Roswell woman talked about the ongoing efforts to repair and widen roads along the WIPP transportation route.

Nevertheless, even the most knowledgeable individuals generally did not know which government agency had primary regulatory authority in regard to WIPP. Many participants thought that the Department of Energy (DoE) was self-regulating in regard to WIPP. For example, in Roswell four participants guessed that DoE regulated the safety of WIPP, two thought it was the DoE and EPA together, one guessed it was the EPA, and two admitted to having no idea whatsoever.

In Albuquerque, participants were asked whether they had ever heard of a connection between WIPP and the EPA. The response was “no,” but participants spontaneously began discussing whether EPA *ought to* have a regulatory role. One man said, “Well there has to be [a connection between WIPP and the EPA]. That’s their job.” Later, he added, “I would think that the EPA would have been involved in this since day one because there’d have to be an impact statement before they put a shovel into the ground.” One woman commented, “I should think that they would have a connection, because I think of EPA as clean air and the environment, as their name says. If there’s any leakage at WIPP, it’s going to go into the air.”

⁴ To maintain confidentiality, participants are not identified by name in this report. Quotations of participants are often verbatim, but some are condensed to remove unnecessary words and vocalizations (e.g., “um” and “ah”). To maintain the character of the participants’ own statements, no quotes have been edited extensively.

Another woman chimed in, “The EPA should have a dual role. Cleaning up existing sites...as well as making sure that WIPP is safe.”

Santa Fe participants were the least certain about who might regulate WIPP. One answer, from a WIPP proponent, was that scientists had studied different geologic formations and discovered WIPP, but the participant had no clear idea about who commissioned such research or how conclusive it was. A WIPP opponent ventured a very different guess, speculating that the CIA and the Pentagon were probably involved in developing WIPP. In this view, geologic studies were only a way of rationalizing decisions that were made on the basis of power politics and bribes to the host state.

CRITICAL VIEWS OF WIPP

As these last two comments suggest, participants had widely varying views of WIPP. Before the moderator even asked for opinions on WIPP, participants who were critical of the facility volunteered their concerns in response to the aforementioned factual questions. When asked, “What is WIPP?”, a Santa Fe woman answered, “The basic problem is they’ve created a problem they don’t know how to deal with.” Another woman said that people are worried about a “car accident, with the truck, and then the leakage, evacuating towns, and not being able to handle it.” An Albuquerque woman gave a similar response.

All participants were forthright in expressing their views toward WIPP when asked to do so directly. By five-to-four margins, both the Albuquerque and Roswell participants said that if a referendum were held today, they would support the opening of WIPP. The Santa Fe participants, by contrast, opposed opening WIPP five-to-one, with one participant undecided.

The concerns expressed about WIPP were myriad, but most concerned trust and, indirectly, safety. In the Santa Fe focus group, one woman expressed a general concern about the “unknowns” involved in WIPP. “They haven’t done enough research,” she said. “They aren’t really sure what they’re doing.” Another added, “I think we don’t know enough about the kinds of processes about what’s going on inside the caves they dug out....We don’t know enough about the geology to know that.”

A related view was that the government has *proven* its ignorance on nuclear issues in the past. One Albuquerque woman talked about her experience growing up in the 1950s. She remembered the bomb drills they would practice to “duck and cover” in the event of a nuclear attack. “I was lied to,” she said flatly. An older woman in the Albuquerque group talked about her past experiences as a laborer: “I worked in nuclear applications. They said it was safe to be a certain distance away, and now it turns out they were wrong.” A Roswell man who had worked at a uranium mine in years past expressed a similar view; he now wonders

whether the miners were as safe as he was told they were at the time. Finally, a woman in Santa Fe said that when she lived in Wyoming, the government lied to her about airborne radiation.

Another variation on this view was a general distrust of government as a whole, regardless of the issue at-hand. This was the view expressed by a Roswell woman: “I don’t trust the government that much. Our U.S. Senators and Congressmen just want to get more money to New Mexico. We’re financed by the federal government as it is anyhow.” Another Roswell woman added, “We would have no way as citizens of checking whether high-level waste was going there.” Her concern was not that the government is deceitful about WIPP’s safety but that it may be trying to deceive the public as to what will ultimately be *stored* at WIPP. In her view, the Yucca mountain facility won’t open until 2015, and what’s to stop “them” from bringing high-level waste to WIPP? “Don’t kid me,” she laughed. “I know where the high level stuff is going to go.” A Santa Fe woman shared a fear that WIPP would store waste it wasn’t designed for; in her mind, it was likely that nuclear waste from foreign countries would find its way to WIPP.

A couple of participants saw WIPP not only as typical government mischief but also as an instance of the densely-packed, East Coast states exploiting the sparsely populated ones: “Seems to me a lot of places where it’s stored are out East, and they’d *love* to have it stored out West. To them, we look like huge open, uninhabitable spaces.”

One woman in Roswell said she had another concern about WIPP’s geographic location. Carlsbad, she said, “is too close to an international border. We used that ‘90 miles from our shores’ thing in 1960 when the Russians put missiles in Cuba to say they could not do anything that dangerous near our border....“The Rio Grande [River] *is* our border.” The damage can be so “far reaching” that it is insensitive for the U.S. to expect Mexico to tolerate WIPP so close to its border. In return, she added, Mexico won’t try to keep out terrorists on our behalf, which leaves WIPP vulnerable to foreign intrusion.

Roswell critics of WIPP were also the only ones to bring up a specific concern about groundwater contamination. Whereas transportation dangers came up in each group, only the Roswell group spontaneously raised doubts about the ability of the salt beds to secure the transuranic waste and prevent any seepage into the local groundwater.

SUPPORT FOR WIPP

The proponents of WIPP shared concerns about waste transport and storage, but had an equal--or often greater--concern about the alternative. “It has to go somewhere,” a Santa Fe woman said. “They can’t just leave it above ground for ever and ever and ever.” An Albuquerque man made a similar comment: “I’d rather see this stuff underground than

covered in the backyard somewhere. People say they don't want New Mexico to become a dumping ground, but everybody else is just like we are. Nobody wants it in their backyard." A Roswell woman echoed those words: "Nobody wants nuclear waste, but it has to go somewhere." Another Roswell woman expressed this view in greater depth:

I've read that they've studied it, and measured it, and tested it for years and years and decided that it's safe. From my view, we've got it, and there is no good place in the world to put it. We can't ship it to the moon. It's gotta go somewhere, and wherever it goes, there's gonna be an element of risk that you can't completely eliminate. It's gotta go somewhere because where it is now is worse.

In Albuquerque, some proponents added that their support for WIPP was still contingent upon final testing and evaluation. As one man said, "If all the agencies involved sign off and say that this thing is the most viable method we have at this time, I'd say go ahead." Afterward, a woman said, "I'm in favor of opening it eventually, once I know it is safe." One woman opposed to WIPP expressed concerns but said she was reassured by even the small amount of information about WIPP that she had already heard in the focus group discussion. She had entered the room as a WIPP critic but in less than an hour had already come to believe that the site was being studied carefully for any possible safety hazards.

In the Roswell focus group, by contrast, WIPP proponents sounded less tolerant of critics' views and characterized them as either misguided or selfish. Regarding the danger associated with transporting waste along New Mexico highways, he said that "there's been more opposition to this WIPP site than there has been to drunken drivers."

Another Roswell man commented that there is a connection between military nuclear testing and nuclear power, and New Mexico owes a lot to the military nuclear industry. Two other Roswell participants linked nuclear weapons waste and the benefits of nuclear energy. As one woman said, "After something is invented, there are some problems with taking care of it. People forget the ways it benefits us daily...." Another man added,

Historically, this is a hostile planet. It always has been.... We enjoy these conveniences. It is better than putting coal in the atmosphere... And we have to do something, we have to make the choice. It's kind of like having the ability to amputate your hand rather than losing your arm.

The woman who linked WIPP with nuclear energy was very adamant that WIPP was safe. She cited as evidence of WIPP's safety the fact that "green grass is now growing in Hiroshima." They said it would take a long time for grass to grow again, she explained, and they were wrong. When asked who "they" were, at first she said she wasn't sure. "Who are

they?” she asked herself. She then decided that she was referring generally to “people that are fearful.” She explained, “I’m just trying to get the kids to school every day while I hope other people are studying these concerns....I don’t know myself, but I always hope that people are looking into the things they ought to be looking into to make a good choice.” For this woman, the critics of WIPP are motivated by fear, whereas she lives with a faith that government officials are doing what’s best for her.

Not all WIPP proponents shared this woman’s trust--nor did this woman extend her trust to all government agencies--but it was clear that part of the chasm between WIPP proponents and opponents is a difference in their trust of the DoE and government itself. As one Albuquerque man said,

You get to the point where you say, ‘Well, who do I believe?’ At some point, you really would like to believe the federal government...and then the state government agrees with them....But you’ve got another interest group out there saying they’re both wrong. Who do you believe? To me, that’s the main problem.

Based on comments such as these, it appears that participants’ views toward WIPP derived in part from larger views about nuclear weapons, nuclear power, and the trustworthiness of government agencies.

WHERE THE PUBLIC HEARS ABOUT WIPP

More specific information about WIPP, though, comes directly from television and newspaper coverage of WIPP. In each focus group, some participants had heard a story about WIPP in the last couple of days. In Albuquerque, the group laughed in recognition when a participant mentioned the “killer bees” story that had recently aired about bees swarming the WIPP site. In Santa Fe, a participant said, “There was an article in the paper this morning about the caverns falling in at a rate faster than they had thought it would.” And in Roswell, a participant cited an article from the morning’s *Roswell Record* on the very same subject. (In fact, that same paper also had a full-page ad favorable toward WIPP and paid for by Westinghouse.)

Some people said that they had heard about WIPP from friends. One Santa Fe man said that he had learned about WIPP “from friends or conversations overheard....I don’t read the newspaper much--I try to avoid the TV,” he explained, “so mostly I get in discussions with people who *have* read the articles. I hear the information skewed by the source I’m talking to.” Another Santa Fe woman noted, as if speaking to herself, “I have friends who have a technical background, but I haven’t really talked to them about it.”

An Albuquerque woman expressed a very different perspective. When WIPP comes on the news, she said, “I will not listen because its too big for me....When I hear ‘nuclear,’ I kind of shut down and feel helpless....A lot of what we’re talking about, even though I think I’m an intelligent person, I don’t understand the terminology.”

This comment stood out because no other participant admitted any difficulty processing information about WIPP. The speaker was not exceptionally uninformed about WIPP; she knew basic details about its location, purpose, and so on. It is this author’s guess that many other participants shared the speaker’s apprehensions. In conjunction with a more general inattention to the details of the average news story, that would explain why people who eat a steady diet of news stories about WIPP still fail to understand important details about the facility and its regulatory environment.

2. PERCEPTIONS OF EPA & ITS REGULATORY ROLE

VIEWS OF THE EPA

The same woman who expressed a reticence to listen to “nuclear news” responded negatively when asked if she had heard anything about the EPA in relation to WIPP. All she had heard about the EPA recently was a story on the difficulty of performing the agency’s functions on a limited budget. “I think they need more funding,” she said.

In all three focus groups, there were participants who had very favorable views of the EPA. One WIPP proponent in Albuquerque said that Albuquerque’s air has gotten cleaner thanks to EPA regulations and, across the nation, “we have rivers that are coming back--urban rivers....It’s amazing,” he said. “I think there’s a lot of success stories there.” A Santa Fe woman made a similar comment: “There came a point somewhere after the 60s where people realized we were ruining our environment,” and the EPA was established to ensure the long-term survival of our planet. “I grew up in New York,” she said, “and I was shocked to hear that they had cleaned up the Hudson river.”

Another Santa Fe woman made this same connection to the 1960s. She self-consciously laughed at herself for saying something *positive* about a government agency:

When I think about the EPA, I think about the results of all the radical stuff that happened in the 60s. It was established when we had enough awareness of what was going on--a view not biased by the military about how to treat the environment....My sense is that there are a lot of good scientific opinions about things, but the EPA is less likely to be biased toward military and industrial applications. That’s probably wildly inaccurate, but that’s my impression of it.

The two men in the Santa Fe focus group also shared a similar view of the EPA: “I associate it with the liberal side of the government,” one said. “My view of government is like, men in suits, just this formidable, unapproachable object that is inhuman, just something, and the EPA is part of the government. And so maybe they aren’t all wearing cable-knit sweaters and stuff like that....I kind of think of them as the savior of the environment.” The other man saw them as a “watchdog group.” Although he used phrasing more commonly employed in anti-government rhetoric, he explained his support for the EPA this way: “They’re the ones who sit up there and make judgments on everyone. I think it’s just another layer of bureaucracy to regulate what people should know better to do. People don’t use their best judgment all the time.”

The EPA also had its detractors, though they usually expressed appreciation for its mission. One Albuquerque woman said, “Well, the whole idea of EPA is a marvelous thing, as far as keeping the environment safe, produce, animals, and so on, trees, forests....But as far as the government goes, they’re a bunch of bozos. As far as protecting, I just don’t know.” When asked whether the “bozos” or the “good idea” was winning at the EPA, she answered, “I’ve worked in the government too long. I’d say ‘bozos.’” Another Albuquerque woman agreed: “They’re a government agency, so they’re not functioning to capacity...I think a lot of it is political at the top and ‘I’ve got to feed my family’ at the bottom, and the idea is lost.” Even an EPA supporter in Santa Fe acknowledged this tension: “It’s hard for agencies to leave politics out, but I hope they transcend politics.”

In Roswell, the criticisms of EPA were the strongest, and they came primarily from the three Roswell participants most adamantly supporting WIPP. One Roswell man said that his annoyance with the EPA stemmed from his past “dealings with the EPA.” In 1972, he explained, “the company I worked for operated one of the largest pit coal mines in the U.S.,” and he did the paperwork regarding EPA regulations. This, coupled with other anecdotes, led him to a simple conclusion:

I think they go to extremes, and if anyone is suspect of making money off of a bad situation, it’s everyone involved in the EPA who’s found some niche to profit from it at our expense. I’ve seen the men out there--the biologists out there--trapping mice and clipping toes off so they know if they caught it a second time....A tree is like a stalk of corn. We plant it again next year, it’s a resource to be used.

Another Roswell man shared this concern and said that the EPA had gone too far in its regulation of the New Mexico wilderness. He feared they would also go to the same extreme with regard to WIPP:

If they decide that WIPP is problematic, it's gonna be a done deal. Trying to change that decision is gonna be next to impossible, as opposed to them having to state a case and WIPP having to state a case, and then objectively having a decision by a third party. The EPA, I don't believe, should have the right to go in because they have a specific agenda. They no longer are a regulatory agency in my opinion. They have their own agenda. The agenda is to maintain at any cost the planet as we know it in its current state without any progress....There's not any consideration of progress. If the EPA were around 20 million years ago when dinosaurs roamed the Earth, we'd be over in our pelts...

A Roswell woman personalized the EPA's alleged overregulation of ranchers by viewing it as a matter of upbringing. As another woman said, "It's the city person telling the rancher how to do his job." A man added that he taught his children how to "raise and butcher" animals and grow plants. Rural people, he said, know how to renew the soil. City people, such as those staffing the EPA, lack "self-resourcefulness" and fail to see the world through "knowledgeable eyes." In sum, they exaggerate the long-term consequences of minor environmental changes.

Despite these views, even the man who saw the EPA as "city people" saw virtue in the EPA: "I've also seen the [results of no EPA]--the strip-mining...in West Virginia and Kentucky, the scars that left on the land." Another Roswell man said, "I work with the EPA constantly, and frankly I'd like to see a lot of wind taken out of their sails. But I'd rather have them than not have them." A woman sitting beside him said, "I think some kind of agency like that is necessary, but somebody needs to tug their chain once in a while and pull it back in 'cause they *do* go too far."

Even amidst the vocal EPA detractors, one Roswell woman basically defended the EPA: "I am very thankful for the EPA," she said:

Our major problem is there aren't enough EPA representatives, so what we hear in the press--the EPA stepping in someplace, like the mice--gets carried a little bit more in the press than what it really is...Between the EPA and OSHA, we have improved construction practices and have a lot less accidents, and a lot less environmental damage and so forth, and I'm very thankful.

Another Roswell woman argued in defense of the EPA with regard to WIPP: "If the EPA was not involved in the WIPP...it would have already opened as basically a hole in the ground. We already know there's leakage, and there would already be nuclear waste there that would already be in the water."

Given these different attitudes toward the EPA, it was not surprising to find that only the Roswell group was reluctant to have the EPA regulate WIPP. When asked directly who

they would like to see regulating WIPP (among a list including the EPA, the DoE, state government, and the U.S. Congress, among others), nine-out-of-nine Albuquerqueans said they would like to have the EPA regulate WIPP's safety. In Santa Fe, four-out-of-seven chose the EPA, with one picking the DoE, one choosing the state legislature, and one saying she didn't know. In Roswell, by contrast, only two people favored EPA regulation, and only then in conjunction with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and the DoE. Three chose DoE/NRC regulation, two chose simply NRC regulation, one chose co-regulation by the DoE and the Department of Transportation, and one chose the United Nations.

TRUST IN EPA'S ABILITY TO EVALUATE WIPP

As a way of probing public trust in the EPA, participants in each focus group were asked to answer a hypothetical question. If the EPA learned that WIPP did, in fact, pose a serious threat to human health or the environment, was it likely that the EPA would certify WIPP *anyway*? Each focus group had trouble answering this question directly. To some participants, the hypothetical situation seemed odd at first, but with repetition and elaboration, answers were eventually forthcoming.

No participant said flatly that the EPA would never do such a thing--that the EPA would never violate its own standards. Its strongest defense was a weak one: "They would have a hard time trying to [violate] the standard," an Albuquerque man said. "If they already have a standard and go against it, [would they succeed]?" Another man in the same group said, "I think there's enough public opinion that the EPA couldn't afford to open it."

A more common response was that the EPA was too weak to stop WIPP from moving forward. An Albuquerque woman said, "They're going to be pressured by the powers that be [to open WIPP]. They'll say it has to go somewhere, so why not WIPP?" Two Santa Fe women agreed, and one said that officials will say to themselves, "Well, we've spent all this money, we've done all these studies, how can we not open it?" Another woman in Santa Fe added that if WIPP "was not just at Carlsbad, then they may not [open it]."

For a Santa Fe woman critical of WIPP, the hypothetical was impossible to answer because the answer depended on whether or not the EPA's process had been an open one:

I'd rather trust the EPA than the Department of Defense....If the EPA is open with their information, then I don't think they're as likely to do it. But if the culture within the EPA is such that they normally don't tell us what's going on, and that's not my perception at this point, then the more secret they are the more likely [they are] to do it, just because they have the power to. That's one reason I don't trust the military to do it...As long as I perceive the culture of the EPA is such that information is public, the more I trust them to

do sensible things. ...But time pressures...can make people do foolish things....The key for me is how open the agency is with their information. I trust an agency a lot more to make good judgments in an atmosphere of openness.

THE LIMITS OF EPA'S POWER

One reason why participants had trouble answering the aforementioned question was that some thought it was *irrelevant* what the EPA did. The answer to the first question was moot because Congress would get WIPP operational whether or not the EPA certified it. This question--about Congress' likely action if the EPA did not approve the DoE's WIPP application--was asked directly to participants, and participants readily answered it.

A Roswell man said, "The politicians have reached a point with WIPP, no matter what goes on, it's a done deal." An Albuquerque man wasn't sure how government would open WIPP--perhaps using "some government edict"--but he was sure that they would make WIPP open.

For another man in Santa Fe, it depended on who controls Congress: "I see it as more likely that the Republicans let it through." Upon a moment's reflection, though, he added, "But I can also see the Democrats letting it go through anyway." He then concluded that regardless of who controls Congress, "Deals get made. I'll give you this if you give me that. It's just a little town in New Mexico. We will give you this contract, and we will give you that, if you vote our way."

Some said that the government would manage to open WIPP if the EPA did not certify it, but they anticipated a long delay. A Santa Fe woman said, "It will go to the court after the government defies the EPA, but it would still open." A man in the same group said, "It would still open, but not in the near future." Congress would overrule the states, but it would take extreme pressure, and it would take a while for that pressure to build.

Yet another view was that the Congress would simply work around the EPA decision. The Congress would address the technical problems EPA identified, or they would change the nature of WIPP. As one Albuquerque man said, "If it's an engineering problem, they throw another few million dollars down the hole. Otherwise, they'll go through a legislative process to change WIPP to something the EPA would certify." Maybe, he suggested, Congress or the DoE would ask the EPA if they could put a different kind of waste down there.

Again, the only defense of the EPA's authority was really a reference to the pressures the public can bring to bear upon the EPA and the government as a whole. An Albuquerque woman said, "I think there are a lot of eyes on this project, and I don't think the EPA could afford to back down. This is happening all over the world, not just in the United States." A

Santa Fe woman embodied this same view, rather than expressing it in the abstract: “In spite of our votes,” she said, “we have little to say about government. We vote, we vote for the party, sometimes we vote for the person, but they pretty much do what they want. I write to [them], I get answers sometimes. I haven’t written to them about WIPP, *but I will.*”

3. EVALUATIONS OF EPA MATERIALS

Hoping to respond to such enthusiasm, the EPA has prepared publications on WIPP that the moderator provided to participants at this point in the focus groups. The participants looked at two documents--*EPA’s Communication Plan for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant* and *EPA and the WIPP*. Participants were given a few minutes to read the materials, then commented on their content and layout.

DEALING WITH DETAILS

The participants did not have long to closely examine them. The lack of positive comment may in part be due to time constraints. Some participants did find the documents informative, and one Albuquerque woman noted that she liked the text in *Communication Plan* about the public information on WIPP that is available.

It was clear from participant comments that although some readers found the pamphlets too detailed, others found them too simple. One Albuquerque woman suggested remedying the problem by providing two levels of detail or simply two different versions of the same document.

If there is only one version, a Santa Fe man pointed out that some details require so much prior knowledge that they are humorous even to people with some technical background. He, and others, had difficulty understanding some of the graphs and figures in *EPA and the WIPP*, especially the diagram of WIPP (pp. 2-3). Nobody in the group had a guess as to what a “heated pillar” was, and they all found “rock behavior area” to be an amusing phrase. One man asked if that was where you put a rock for a “time out” when it misbehaves. Also, focus group participants noticed that the graph did not give any indication as to its scale. Perhaps a revised *EPA and the WIPP* might avoid such technical language whenever possible and provide appropriate details, such as scale, where appropriate.

A FAQ FORMAT

A suggestion that caught the attention of the entire Albuquerque focus group was from a man who said that the *EPA and the WIPP* pamphlet would be more helpful if it was framed in a question-and-answer format that addressed the most “frequently asked questions” (FAQs) about WIPP. Building on his suggestion, participants volunteered the following questions for such a publication:

- How safe is WIPP?
- How will WIPP be monitored?
- What are the safety criteria, what are the safety thresholds for health?
- Who does the hiring for WIPP? What are the requirements?
- How will the waste be contained, transported, and handled?
- If there is an accident, what happens? Are the WIPP loads secure? Could they be taken by terrorists?
- What will be the chain of command and responsibility for WIPP?
- Who do you turn to if you don't like someone's job performance?

Participants in the Santa Fe focus group also raised questions that this format could address directly:

- Have there been any earthquakes in the Carlsbad area?
- How is the WIPP site constructed?
- What are the markers on the site?
- What does the EPA do after the WIPP site is sealed? Do they just walk away?
- What is a safe release of radiation, and if WIPP was breached, how much more than background would it be? What's the worst case scenario?
- What are the compliance criteria--actual numbers relative to safe, normal levels of radiation?
- If WIPP isn't certified, what's their next step?
- What happens if WIPP doesn't pass one of its periodic inspections? What's the backup plan if WIPP fails?

BOOSTING CREDIBILITY BY PRESENTING OPPOSING VIEWS

Participants also suggested that the EPA publications might be more credible if they included statements from people and organizations with different agendas and perspectives. An Albuquerque woman said that she would like to have opinions from “people outside the EPA--Ralph Nader, environmental groups.” That would be helpful, she explained, because it would give a well-rounded view. She said that she had a basic distrust of government that stemmed from her experiences in the 1960s. As she read *EPA and the WIPP*, she said, “I feel a little bit of indoctrination going on.”

Another Albuquerque woman agreed: “They're only telling us what we want to know.” A man added that the EPA publication would look more balanced “if we heard from other people.” Possible candidates that participants named as “opposing views” or simply

“different perspectives” included Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, the Carlsbad City Council, and Native American representatives from the area.

SUGGESTIONS FOR HOLDING PUBLIC MEETINGS

Finally, some participants commented on what it would take to get them to attend the public meetings that EPA and others hold on WIPP. One barrier to attendance is a lack of awareness that such meetings are taking place. A Santa Fe woman suggested that the EPA “shout out” their 800 number “on late-night TV” and publish the number in the newspaper. The number, in turn, could give information about upcoming meetings. A man in the same group suggested that the EPA should “just put a little blurb on the Monday night football game” to inform him of any upcoming meetings.

Beyond merely informing the public of such meetings, though, some Santa Fe participants added that they would “need to know about it well in advance.” Participants said that they would want to know the agenda before deciding whether or not to come. The EPA, said one participant, needs to communicate that the public is truly welcome and that there will be a role for members of the general public who choose to attend. Some participants said that public meetings too often have no place for the average person, and that they would attend meetings more often if they felt included and useful.

4. TRIAL-RUN CITIZEN CONFERENCES

Public sentiments such as these are one of the reasons that the IPP, in collaboration with the EHC, developed the concept of Citizen Conferences, a public meeting format that places the general public at the *center* of the meeting. As explained in the Introduction, the second half of each focus group was a trial-run Citizen Conference. After breaking for lunch, the focus group was reconceptualized as something akin to an active jury, asking questions of experienced activists, scientists, and officials, then deliberating among themselves.

The purpose of this final section of this focus group report is to glimpse how a random sample of the public might function in an actual Citizen Conference, which would last a longer period of time and take place in a public setting.

THE QUALITY OF THE QUESTIONS

With regard to the Citizen Conferences, one of the most encouraging findings of the focus groups was that participants took very seriously their roles as citizen jurors. They did appear to respect each representative’s expertise, yet they were not overwhelmed by the credentials of the people they met.

As just one example, scientist Wendell Weart told the Albuquerque group that he had worked on the WIPP problem for decades and assured them that from his perspective,

scientists *have* studied WIPP for a long time--most of his lifetime. Much later, one of the Albuquerque participants reflected on Weart's statement and said that it may seem like a long time to him, but from their vantage point, there is still no reason to rush ahead with the opening of WIPP. Albuquerque participants all gave the representatives high marks on credibility and informativeness, but that did not prevent them from seeing the problem from their *own* perspectives.⁵

One of the results of this professional detachment was participants' ability to ask probing, insightful questions of the representatives. Aside from the deliberative session at the end of the focus group, it was the question-and-answer sessions that tested the abilities of the participants. In many respects, participants passed this test by asking the kinds of questions that one would hope for in a searching public dialog on WIPP.

Breadth and Depth

In an ideal question-and-answer session, participants could be expected to ask a broad range of relevant questions. This was certainly the case in Albuquerque, where questions ranged from the construction of the storage facility, to the transport routes, to the transport containers. Questions addressed every aspect of WIPP, though some issues were discussed in less depth than others. In Roswell and Santa Fe, questions also covered a broad range of issues. Another indicator of the breadth of questions asked was the groups' ability to exhaust their initial lists of questions for the representatives. During each focus group, the author (as moderator) kept a list of the questions participants raised and noted that participants eventually asked all of the relevant questions they had developed. In some cases, participants *repeated* questions to different representatives when the first person they asked was unable to answer the question or satisfy the participant's curiosity.

On the other hand, it is also valuable for a panel of citizens to ask novel questions that best suit the representatives at-hand. In these focus groups, participants only had four representatives to question, and each brought a slightly different expertise. Participants readily understood what issues representatives might be especially qualified to discuss and gave them appropriate questions. In Albuquerque, participants grilled Hank Jenkins-Smith with questions about radiation and WIPP's safety until they discovered that he felt better qualified to discuss the political environment surrounding WIPP. They then probed his

⁵ After the fourth representative spoke, the Albuquerque focus group participants filled out one-page questionnaires and rated all speakers as high on both the informativeness and credibility of the information they provided. It was decided to not repeat that procedure in later focus groups, as the questionnaires generated uniform responses and their administration detracted from the deliberative character of the afternoon's proceedings.

knowledge by asking about changes in WIPP legislation and the ways in which politics can shape decisions about WIPP. This focus group also fired a wide array of transportation questions to Ralph Davis, a New Mexico government official who had special knowledge about the transportation of wastes to WIPP. In Santa Fe, participants understood that scientist Peter Swift was responsible for evaluating the design of WIPP and reporting his findings to the DoE. They not only asked him scientific questions, but they also asked him to explain reporting procedures at Sandia National Laboratories (SNL) and the ability for a dissenting voice to speak out. In Roswell, participants asked environmental activist Don Hancock for information about WIPP's deficiencies or liabilities, which were of particular concern to him.

Challenging Questions

Participants also demonstrated the ability to challenge representatives with respectful but difficult questions. This is another important feature of a good public because these questions force representatives to provide information that might not otherwise come to the surface. In Albuquerque, perhaps the most challenging direct question was reserved for Ralph Davis, who was asked a series of questions about the safety of transporting waste along New Mexico's highways. As the group went back-and-forth with Ralph, the group's questions began to focus on the possibility of a hostile capture of a WIPP transport truck for the purpose of making a political statement. After gradually approaching this possibility, Davis finally acknowledged that if terrorists want a WIPP truck, "They can take it." After all, he explained, "It's just a trash truck." The group appeared stunned to hear that, and many in the group became concerned that the government had not prepared itself for a terrorist or political demonstrator determined to destroy a WIPP truck and injure people in the process of doing so.

In Santa Fe, a participant asked a series of questions of scientist Peter Swift in an effort to understand what his own views were regarding WIPP. The most revealing question was one that asked Swift how he would have designed WIPP. Swift explained that his job was to evaluate the existing design, not to question it, but when the focus group participant would not relent, Swift acknowledged that he had considered the question many times himself. He said that he did not talk about it much because people usually did not think to ask him, but he said that it was a mistake to have dug the salt caverns before it was clear that WIPP was ready to proceed. Premature digging, he pointed out, could end WIPP's operational phase prematurely, as the walls of the caverns begin to close.

In Roswell, participants repeatedly asked representatives whether they would be willing to live on top of the WIPP site. The question reflected the heightened concern of

Roswell residents, who live relatively close to the WIPP facility, and they found some of the answers they heard to be revealing. Joe Davis, an EHC staff member commenting on the media coverage of WIPP, answered by saying that WIPP was safe enough to live above, but that if he lived there, he would study it more carefully. At least one participant took this to mean that outside observers do not have as much at stake as nearby residents and that Roswell citizens should not rely upon the national or state media to cover WIPP adequately.

THOUGHTFUL DELIBERATION

Whereas all three focus groups asked probing, thoughtful questions, deliberation in the three focus groups was not equal in depth or quality. The Santa Fe focus group was probably the least deliberative. Participants held rather rigidly to their initial views, although one participant moved from opposing the opening of WIPP to supporting the WIPP regulatory and oversight process, and another participant went from being initially undecided toward WIPP to unambiguously supporting the WIPP process.⁶ The discussion in Santa Fe was blocked by one participant's fundamental distrust of government. The group made the best of its situation by focusing on this issue and exploring the extent to which the WIPP process could incorporate cynical citizens. Suggestions included building a no-revision clause into existing WIPP legislation such that the project could not undergo major revisions (i.e., changes in what kind of waste can go to WIPP) without passing a statewide referendum on the matter. Also, the participants engaged in a thoughtful debate about the incredible responsibility citizens give themselves if they wish to put such matters to public vote, rather than entrusting them to government agencies.

The Roswell focus group was also deeply divided, and both it and the Santa Fe group were unable to reach consensus on the question, "Should the New Mexico public place its trust in the existing WIPP oversight and regulatory process?" Although neither group could reach agreement, both showed signs of sifting through conflicting interpretations of the same information. In both groups there was disagreement about what one of the representatives had said, and in each group, the group appeared to come down on the side of the more accurate recollection of what was said (accuracy behind judged by watching the videotape days after the forum). For example, in Roswell one participant remembered Joe Davis as saying that he did not know much about WIPP because it did not really concern him. Another participant clarified Davis' earlier comments by pointing out that what he had

⁶ Deliberation, though, should not be equated with changing one's mind. It is possible to deliberate judiciously on an issue yet maintain the same basic policy position as before. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see John Gastil, Gina Adam, & Hank Jenkins-Smith, *Understanding Public Deliberation* (Albuquerque: Institute for Public Policy, 1995).

actually said was that nearby residents should *themselves* be more concerned about WIPP than they are.

Like Santa Fe's deliberations, those in Roswell had the same enduring conflict between those trusting the existing process and those unwilling to trust it. But perhaps because of better self-moderation or because of more reasoned debate, Roswell participants were able to explore in greater depth the reservations critics expressed. Three criticisms of the process were clearly articulated and remained unaddressed: (1) what will the U.S. do with the *rest* of its transuranic waste after WIPP is full; (2) is the EPA conducting independent research on WIPP, or does it rely upon DoE's own research; and (3) how can we trust that the process won't change if it has already changed significantly since 1990? Had this been a full-scale Citizens Conference, the Roswell group might have benefited from the opportunity to call back witnesses to address at least two of these questions.

By contrast, the Albuquerque focus group was able to reach consensus, agreeing to trust the existing oversight process. The critics of WIPP agreed that the process, which included critics of WIPP in oversight roles, should be able to address their present concerns, and the one participant who initially held-out from the majority opinion ultimately went along with the group so long as it was clear that she trusted the *existing* process. Her concern was that Congress would change the process, and she made it clear that such changes might end her trust in the process. The Albuquerque participants were all adamant that by trusting the *process* they did not necessarily believe that WIPP was safe to open; rather, they asserted the belief that the existing regulatory and oversight process was adequate to *determine* whether WIPP was safe.

This realization was perhaps the most encouraging finding because it demonstrated the group's ability to focus on the question at-hand and evaluate the WIPP process rather than WIPP itself. This new understanding manifested itself as changes in participants' support for opening WIPP. In the Albuquerque focus group, for instance, five of the nine participants initially favored opening WIPP, but after deliberating, all but two *opposed* its opening. Their reasoning was clear: how could it be opened *now* when the regulatory and oversight process is still underway? The Roswell focus group began with the same five-to-four majority in favor of opening WIPP and shifted to an eight-to-one opposition, using the same reasoning. The Santa Fe group had begun with clear opposition (five-to-one) toward opening WIPP, and, not surprisingly, no movement from this initial position was observed.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the three New Mexico focus groups on WIPP showed that the New Mexico public has a varied and rich understanding of WIPP, and that public views are subject to change in light of new information. Participants in the focus groups associated WIPP and the EPA with much broader views of the government, its motivations, and its trustworthiness. Both proponents and opponents of WIPP shared a similar knowledge of WIPP, but few participants knew details about the facility. Instead, each group appeared to fill in their knowledge gaps with preconceptions about either the selfishness and ignorance of government agencies and officials or the reliability of scientists and the Department of Energy.

The focus groups also showed how eager participants were to expose their preconceptions to new information. Participants let go of some misconceptions, such as the belief that commercial fuel rods were scheduled to go to WIPP. Participants also shed some stereotypes, such as the belief that environmental critics are irrational or that government scientists are lackeys. For the most part, participants appeared willing to consider alternative points of view, whether expressed by a fellow citizen or an expert. Many participants did not change their overall opinion of WIPP, but they *did* change their understanding of WIPP and their perceptions of both the proponents and opponents of the storage facility.

APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT

This is a copy of the script that the moderator followed in the Santa Fe and Roswell focus groups. The Albuquerque script was very similar, but minor revisions were made after the Albuquerque session.

9:15-9:55 Focus group participants arrive.

Sign in participants on the attendance roster.

Get each participant to fill out the video release form.

Give each participant a name tag.

9:55-10:00 Participants are seated in the focus group facility. Others in attendance are seated in the adjoining viewing room. One IPP staff person will stay in the hallway and look for any late arrivals.

10:00-10:10 The moderator introduces participants to the focus group setting and explains in very general terms what will happen during the morning and afternoon. WIPP is not brought up.

Why we conduct focus groups: research

How you were selected: random

Who is watching and how: via camera, researchers, people you will meet

What we will do: talk about an important NM issue

Your responsibility: to express your views openly and honestly and to respect other participants' views.

Your compensation: \$100 for participating. In cash at the end of the focus group.

Any questions before we begin?

10:10-10:45 Focus group on WIPP regulatory and oversight process.

Begin using an open-ended funnel interview technique, moving from general to more specific questions. Elicit views about WIPP, how these views developed, and how participants view the organizations and actors associated with WIPP.

Has anyone heard about the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, or WIPP?

Where is the WIPP facility located?

Is the WIPP facility already open? If not, when is it scheduled to open?

What may be stored at the WIPP facility?

Where are wastes from the U.S. nuclear weapons program currently being stored?

How will these materials be transported to WIPP?

What are your views about the WIPP facility? What are your views based upon?

After initial questions, provide any background information that participants haven't already provided one another and correct any basic misconceptions.

Who will decide whether the WIPP facility is safe to open?

What authority does the New Mexico state government have regarding the opening of WIPP? The Department of Energy? The Environmental Protection Agency?

10:45-11:40 Focus group on EPA and its printed materials.

Briefly explain EPA's role in the WIPP process and distinguish its role from that of DoE.

What are your views of the EPA? Trustworthiness? Accountability? Competence? Public outreach efforts? Who would you most trust to determine the safety of the WIPP: the EPA, DoE, DOT, Defense Department, US Congress, NM Legislature, NM Governor?

Do you think that the EPA would allow DOE to open the WIPP facility even if it learned that WIPP threatened human health or the environment?

If EPA does not permit DOE to open the WIPP, would the U.S. Congress find a way to open it anyway?

Provide EPA materials to participants (i.e., EPA's Communications Plan for the WIPP and Public Participation: EPA and the WIPP). Give participants a few minutes to look them over and elicit comment upon them.

Have you seen these materials before?

After seeing these brochures, how would you feel about participating in a public meeting on WIPP?

How might the EPA get people interested in attending such meetings?

Aside from public meetings, how might EPA try to get input from the general public?

11:40-11:45 Briefly introduce the second half and explain lunch logistics.

We will get address a question: "Should the New Mexico public place its trust in the existing WIPP oversight and regulatory process?"

We will learn more about WIPP: three people will answer questions for us (refer to the list of representatives for the focus group).

You are going to be something like a jury, reaching a verdict about the WIPP regulatory and oversight process. Think about what information you need. We will get to ask people

questions. During lunch, you may take your pad with you and write down any questions that occur to you.

11:45-12:30 Break for lunch. Box lunches provided.

Put up posters.

Confirm logistics with representatives.

Check in with observers for feedback on the focus group.

Eat lunch.

12:30-12:45 Focus group participants return to focus group room. Moderator explains to participants the format of the afternoon's activities and impresses upon them the importance of being curious and asking questions of the representatives they will meet.

We will get address a question: "Should the New Mexico public place its trust in the existing WIPP oversight and regulatory process?"

We will learn more about WIPP: three speakers will come to talk to us: the Director of the IPP, a scientist from Sandia Labs, a researcher at the Southwest Information & Research Center, & the WIPP Emergency Medical Preparedness Coordinator for the NM Dept. of Health.

You are going to be something like a jury, reaching a verdict about the WIPP regulatory and oversight process. Think about what information you need. Prepare questions for the people you are going to meet. Your job is to be curious and ASK questions.

After the last speaker, you will have the chance to talk among yourselves to answer our central question.

12:45-1:10 Moderator introduces first speaker, who then makes a brief presentation and answers questions.

1:10-1:35 Moderator introduces second speaker, who then makes a brief presentation and answers questions.

1:35-1:40 Short break

1:40-2:05 Moderator introduces third speaker, who then makes a brief presentation..

2:05-2:30 Moderator introduces final speaker, who then makes a brief presentation and answers questions.

2:30-2:35 Short break (if necessary)

2:35-3:30 Focus group participants deliberate on the WIPP oversight process.

Ask participants to reflect upon the credibility and informativeness of each of the representatives they met. Ask them if they heard any conflicting or contradictory statements. How can they resolve any factual or philosophical conflicts they heard?

Instruct the participants to take the form of a jury, deliberating on the question, “Should the New Mexico public place its trust in the existing WIPP oversight and regulatory process?”

If the participants answer yes, they will have to explain what aspects of the process make them confident that their interests and health and environmental concerns are being addressed.

If the participants answer no, they will have to explain how the process should be changed to better take into account the public’s concerns.

If the participants answer yes, ask if they will support the EPA’s decision if it chooses to certify WIPP and waste begins to be transported there.

In either case, ask how they’d respond to hypothetical scenarios: (a) EPA certifies WIPP and oversight groups, on balance, agree; (b) EPA certifies WIPP and oversight disagrees; (c) EPA does NOT certify WIPP and oversight agrees; and (d) EPA does NOT certify WIPP and oversight disagrees.