



ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH CENTER
A Division of the National Safety Council
1025 Connecticut Avenue, NW • Suite 1200
Washington, DC 20036

ENTERED

February 20, 1997

Dear Interested Party:

As the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) moves through the certification process, transuranic wastes will be prepared to move through the United States to a permanent disposal site near Carlsbad, New Mexico.

Under a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Energy, the Environmental Health Center is beginning a regular series of informational mailings on WIPP to key members of the media, stakeholders, and experts. This letter is to introduce the National Safety Council's Environmental Health Center (EHC).

EHC is a division of the National Safety Council, an 85-year-old nonprofit, nongovernmental organization headquartered outside of Chicago. The Safety Council -- with some 17,000 institutional members and more than 70 state and regional chapters -- is an acknowledged national leader on accident prevention and home, workplace, auto, and highway safety issues.

The Safety Council established EHC in January 1988 to help society and individual citizens better understand and act knowledgeably and responsibly in the face of potential environmental health risks. Since that start, EHC has built a strong record of effective, nonpartisan communication on a range of environmental health issues.

EHC's overarching objective in its cooperative agreement with the Department of Energy is to facilitate timely, accurate, comprehensive communications with the public and the news media on issues involving the transportation, management, shipment and disposal of radioactive materials. Toward this end, EHC has developed the following:

- Database of key contacts, which includes national, state, and local experts on radioactive waste; community organizations, civic leaders, journalists, and educators;
- Periodic "backgrounder" briefing papers (approximately 800 words each), for nontechnical audiences, on WIPP-related issues, particularly the dissemination of data, upcoming events, and status of regulatory issues relating to the facility;
- A World Wide Web site to present the most up-to-date information on the WIPP (<http://www.nsc.org/ehc/wipp.htm>)

We at EHC look forward to working with you. Our aim is to serve as a source of reliable, nonpartisan information that will promote improved public understanding of the WIPP. If you would like to obtain our previous WIPP backgrounders, or have any questions at all, please do not hesitate to call me at (202) 293-2270 extension 483.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dawn Amore".

Dawn Amore
Project Officer



Suite 1200
1025 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036

Voice:
(202) 293-2270

Fax:
(202) 293-0032

E-mail:
ehc@nsc.org

Website:
<http://www.nsc.org/ehc/wipp.htm>

EHC Contact:

Dawn Amore
(202) 293-2270 ext. 483

DOE Contacts:

Dennis Hurtt:
(505) 234-7327

WIPP Information Center:
1-800-336-WIPP

WIPP Website:
<http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us>

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Backgrounder #7

Backgrounder

The History of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP)

The origins of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) go back to some of the earliest United States efforts to deal with radioactive waste.

During the World War II and Cold War decades, national security dictated that speed and secrecy take precedence in weapons production. As a result, the U.S. often postponed costs and work associated with environmentally responsible disposal of defense radioactive waste. By 1955, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission asked the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to study permanent disposal methods, and a subsequent Academy report recommended bedded salt deposits as a promising medium for geologic disposal.

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), after initially rejecting a potential site in Kansas, identified the "Salado" salt formation east of Carlsbad, New Mexico, as a potential repository site. A first borehole, probing down 3,000 feet, found salt bed deformations and pressurized brine. Both of these conditions raised the prospect that wastes might escape from the repository. So the USGS suggested moving the site seven miles further southwest, to roughly where it is today.

Congress first provided authority for construction at the WIPP in a 1979 defense bill. Congress in that law expressed its intention that WIPP be developed so that it might demonstrate safe methods for disposal of generated transuranic (TRU) waste, and it restricted disposal at WIPP to just certain TRU wastes resulting from the national defense program. (See Backgrounder #2, "Transuranic Waste: What it is...and isn't")

Practically from the start, the State of New Mexico has been active in overseeing the WIPP. Through federal legislation, the state established the Environmental Evaluation Group (EEG) in 1978 to help it do its oversight job. In the early 1980s, New Mexico and the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) agreed to a *Consultation and Cooperation Agreement* spelling out terms on studies to be undertaken, communications activities, and technical issues. In subsequent years, the DOE signed additional agreements with New Mexico, stipulating that the WIPP would comply with state, federal and local environmental laws and regulations.

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