

# Officials maintain sunny WIPP outlook

NMED, however, may  
be biggest stumbling  
block before May

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CARLSBAD — Energy Department officials are maintaining a sunny outlook for Carlsbad's controversial Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, but realize environmentalists and state officials could create some obstruction.

"We're planning to open the facility and begin operations in May 1998 and we're doing everything we can to meet the requirements to do that," said George Dials, manager of the DOE's Carlsbad Area Office.

While the DOE and WIPP's regulator, the Environmental Protection Agency, are on schedule for a May opening, the New Mexico Environment Department seems to be dragging its feet, Dials said. The EPA is charged with deciding whether WIPP is operational, a decision expected in mid-October. The agency also regulates the storage of radioactive waste.

The NMED is responsible for issuing permits to transport and store hazardous materials, not hazardous waste, in New Mexico.

Trace amounts of hazardous materials, such as chemical solvents, will be mixed in with the transuranic waste slated for disposal in excavated rooms 2,160 feet below the surface at WIPP. TRU waste consists of protective clothing, tools, glassware and equipment contaminated with radioactive elements including plutonium. Transuranic waste is produced during nuclear fuel assembly, during weapons research, production, and

cleanup, and as a result of reprocessing spent nuclear fuels.

It's NMED's sluggishness on what Dials calls a "simple decision" and the threat of litigation by environmental groups and an attorney general long-opposed to the project that raises concerns.

"Some groups have said, 'no matter what happens, we're going to sue you,'" Dials said. And New Mexico Attorney General Tom Udall, Dials added, "has generally taken a position he's going to litigate. I find that interesting because he's using New Mexico taxpayers' dollars to delay a solution to an environmental problem posing a risk to New Mexicans."

Among the first shipments of transuranic waste scheduled to come to the WIPP is from Los Alamos National Laboratory near Santa Fe. Recently, the city of Espanola, about 15 miles north of Los Alamos, passed a resolution calling for all state and federal agencies involved with WIPP to "act quickly so that the waste can be placed in a safe repository."

"We are located downhill and often, downwind from LANL and are subject to distribution of such perilous waste through winds, water, fire and other forces of nature," the resolution says.

One of the resolution's targets is the NMED, which received in May 1995 DOE's application for a Resource Conservation and Recovery Act permit. The permit governs hazardous materials. The NMED declared the application administratively complete in July 1995, and ruled it technically complete in June 1996.

Recently, the agency asked for additional information and more money to study the application. The DOE gave the NMED another

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\$437,000, reaching a grand total of \$1.3 million the DOE has provided NMED since May 1995 to review the application.

When NMED finally releases a draft RCRA permit, it must hold public hearings before issuing a final permit. All that takes time, Dials pointed out. And for something he says is a relatively minor issue.

"In our view, it's a very simple decision. There's not enough hazardous materials stored here to even have to qualify for a (RCRA) permit," Dials said, noting WIPP is not required by law to comply with RCRA's hazardous waste rules.

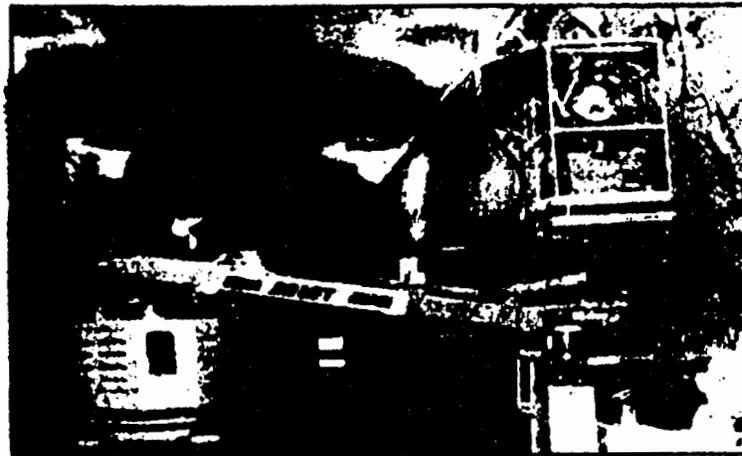
The WIPP is designed to permanently dispose of

transuranic waste in excavated salt beds 2,150 feet below the earth's surface. The facility is located 26 miles east of Carlsbad.

The DOE volunteered to comply with RCRA, he said, "to assure the public we are taking care of their health and safety concerns."

Hazardous emissions from WIPP would be insignificant compared to other facilities permitted by the NMED, he said. For example, a natural gas facility is allowed to release 4,900 tons of hazardous emissions annually. Potash mines are allowed to emit 2,100 tons. WIPP is estimated to release 57 pounds of hazardous emissions per year.

"It would be tragic," Dials said, "to have RCRA hold up



Submitted photo

A worker keeps busy putting up a frame in the WIPP.

solving this very difficult nuclear waste disposal problem."

To open by May 1998,

WIPP needs approval by the EPA as well as an RCRA permit in April. EPA Secretary Carol Browner is expected to

issue a proposed decision next month about whether to open WIPP, followed by a series of public hearings and a final decision. Other activities between now and May are a declaration that WIPP is operationally ready, and a final decision by DOE Secretary Federico Pena in April about whether to open WIPP.

WIPP employs about 783 people, including about 630 with Westinghouse Electric Corp.'s Waste Isolation Division, 35 with Sandia National Laboratories, 63 in the Department of Energy Carlsbad Area Office and people employed by other WIPP contractors. The project is operating on a \$188 million budget.