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WIPP May Get Safety Clearance

EPA Expected To Issue Tentative Decision Soon

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is expected to issue a tentative decision as early as today that says the world's first permanent nuclear waste dump is safe to open next year near Carlsbad.

The proposed decision, which will not be final for six months, will say the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant can safely contain radioactivity for 10,000 years.

"This is a major milestone in moving towards opening next May," said Dennis Hurtt, an Energy Department spokesman at WIPP.

While Hurtt said he did not know the details regarding what the EPA's decision would be, it is highly unlikely the agency will move to deny the permit at this point.

"We know that's what it's going to be," Don Hancock, a vocal WIPP opponent with the Albuquerque-based Southwest Research and

Information Center, said of the EPA's tentative approval. "It's a bad decision."

EPA officials had been expected to issue the proposed decision on Wednesday, but were delayed at least a day. Several sources said they were told the decision would be released today, but they added there remained a chance it would not be released until Friday.

"We have been made aware by the agency that a proposed decision is expected this week, possibly (today)," said Selma Sierra, a spokeswoman for Rep. Joe Skeen, R-N.M., an enthusiastic WIPP supporter. The waste dump is in Skeen's district.

"They (EPA officials) did not indicate what the decision is, but we're optimistic that the proposed decision is it's safe to open WIPP," Sierra added. "This is a major step and one more step closer to reality."

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A spokesman for Republican Sen. Pete Domenici also said approval was expected.

"They don't expect them to say no go," Chris Gallegos said.

Located 26 miles southeast of Carlsbad and nearly a half-mile beneath the surface in ancient salt beds, WIPP would permanently house waste generated during nuclear weapons production. Much of that waste is low to moderately radioactive — plutonium-contaminated clothing, tools and trash.

Waste destined for WIPP, called transuranic waste, is roughly 1,000 times less radioactive than an equivalent volume of spent nuclear fuel.

Plutonium, the element of most concern at WIPP, is a long-lasting radioactive element, but it emits alpha particles. Alpha particles are dangerous if inhaled or eaten, but they can be blocked easily by a piece of paper or an outer layer of skin.

The EPA certification is considered the most significant regulatory hurdle WIPP has to clear because it deals with the essential safety question at the site: can WIPP safely contain plutonium-contaminated material into the distant future?

When the Energy Department applied to the EPA for the certification, it rented a moving van to ship seven copies of the 84,000-page application to Washington. The application with references and attachments grew to roughly 100,000 pages after the EPA asked for additional information.

The documentation was used to show that WIPP can safely contain radioactivity to a certain level for 10,000 years.

The Energy Department wants to begin shipping waste next May.

Before WIPP can open, though, the Energy Department still must issue its official decision to proceed with WIPP — a decision expected in coming weeks — and the New Mexico Environment Department must issue a permit for the handling of chemical waste mixed with the radioactive waste.

Still, WIPP opponents are certain to file lawsuits seeking to prevent WIPP from opening.

Most of the waste destined for WIPP is scheduled to come from sites in the Energy Department's nuclear complex — places such as Los Alamos National Laboratory, Idaho National Engineering Laboratory, Rocky Flats, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Hanford Site and others.

Critics say WIPP will take no more than 15 percent of the volume of radioactive waste at any one of those sites, and that WIPP should be disqualified because of rich oil, gas and potash reserves at the site near Carlsbad. They say insufficient attention has been given to the possibility of what future generations might do — such as drilling for oil and gas below the repository.

But scientists with the National Research Council issued a report last year that said it would not make sense to disqualify WIPP based on guesses about what people might do in the future.

The EPA's proposed decision will be subject to public comment over the next four months, after which the EPA is expected to finalize the decision.