



NEW MEXICO ENERGY, MINERALS  
& NATURAL RESOURCES DEPARTMENT

Secretary Weidler - FYI

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March 2, 1998

To the Editor:

This Op-Ed piece is in response to Mike Taugher's article in the Sunday Albuquerque *Journal* of March 1, 1998, p. A-1. I would appreciate you considering it for publication in the next Sunday *Journal* (March 8).

After reading the referenced article, I was disappointed that it did not reflect the extraordinary measures taken by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), New Mexico and other western states to ensure the safety of the WIPP shipping campaign. Without question, the WIPP shipments will be among the safest on the road if and when the repository commences operations. Consider the following:

- **EXTREMELY STRONG TRANSPORT CONTAINERS.** The article failed to mention that the stainless steel containers to be used in moving the vast majority of all wastes to WIPP have undergone extensive field testing, including a fully engulfing fire which had to reach a temperature of 1,475 degrees Fahrenheit for at least one-half hour. The container, known as the TRUPACT-II, met all of the test requirements specified in the federal regulations and was then certified for use by an independent agency, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.
- **HIGH-QUALITY DRIVERS and DRIVER SAFETY INCENTIVES.** The WIPP transport drivers must meet more stringent requirements than other commercial truck drivers. For example, drivers must have a minimum of 100,000 miles of tractor-trailer driving experience and a clean driving record in order to be considered for hire.

Once hired, each WIPP driver receives extensive training, including specialized instruction on the use of radiation detection equipment that will be carried in every WIPP vehicle. Drivers are also subject to random drug and alcohol tests. And driver penalties for violations are severe. A case in point: a single moving violation or chargeable accident results in immediate termination of employment as a WIPP driver. State officials conduct regularly scheduled audits of the WIPP transport carrier and its drivers to verify their compliance with all applicable laws, regulations and other requirements.

- **INDEPENDENT INSPECTIONS.** Each and every WIPP vehicle will be inspected by State officials before it is dispatched. The inspection criteria are known as the Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance's (CVSA) Enhanced North American Standards. They are more stringent inspection criteria than that applied to any other commercial trucks. The inspection will be used to ensure the WIPP vehicle is "defect free" and to verify that radiation levels are within allowable limits established in federal regulations.

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- **BAD WEATHER and ROAD CONDITIONS.** The States and DOE have agreed on detailed procedures to monitor weather and road conditions so that WIPP shipments can avoid driving hazards. Shipments will not be dispatched from a site if they are likely to encounter severe weather along the route. If such conditions are encountered, a system is in place for coordinating the selection and use of safe parking areas.
- **SHIPMENT NOTIFICATION and TRACKING.** The State of New Mexico will receive advance notification of all WIPP shipments. State officials will also be able to closely track each shipment using a satellite-based monitoring and communications system known as TRANSCOM. One of the special features of TRANSCOM is that it can provide the bill-of-lading for each WIPP shipment and corresponding guidance on the proper emergency response, thereby serving as a useful resource in the event of a transport accident.
- **TRAINING and EXERCISES.** For over 10 years, the DOE and State of New Mexico have been offering a variety of WIPP training courses. These courses are presented to emergency responders free-of-charge, whenever and wherever they desire the training. Included are EMTs and hospital personnel along the route. To date, literally thousands of New Mexicans have received WIPP training, which will continue to be offered for the life of the project. Moreover, the effectiveness of the training is tested through functional drills and full-scale exercises. Such an exercise will be conducted in Santa Fe on Saturday morning, March 14. The public is welcomed to attend.

As should now be apparent, the State has gone to great lengths to adequately protect its citizens and environment from those risks posed by WIPP shipments. The WIPP transport system now in place is, without question, a much better system than that used over the past 50 years to ship plutonium and other radioactive materials to sites such as Los Alamos and Sandia national laboratories. In any event, we are fully committed to ensuring that safety remains the number one priority of the WIPP shipping campaign.

Sincerely,



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