

U.S. Department of Energy  
 Carlsbad Area Office  
 Waste Isolation Pilot Plant  
 P.O. Box 3090  
 Carlsbad, New Mexico 88221

# DOENews

## Media Contacts:

Dennis Hurtt  
 U. S. Department of Energy  
 Carlsbad Area Office  
 (505) 234-7327

Donavan Mager  
 Westinghouse Waste Isolation Division  
 (505) 234-7637  
 (800) 493-9768  
<http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us>

### For Immediate Release

## Carlsbad Area Office Notifies Energy Secretary WIPP Operational Readiness Review is Complete

**CARLSBAD, N.M., April 1, 1998** – The U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Carlsbad Area Office has informed Secretary of Energy Federico Peña that the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) is operationally ready to begin disposal of defense-generated transuranic radioactive waste as early as May 29.

Disposal operations can begin only after final certification is received from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the green light is given by Secretary Peña, and notification is made to Congress.

The Declaration of Readiness announcement, made by Carlsbad Area Office Manager George Dials, is required by law under the conditions of the 1992 WIPP Land Withdrawal Act, as amended in 1996. The declaration is one of several activities required before disposal operations can begin at the WIPP.

"I am declaring that the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant is operationally ready to begin its mission to permanently dispose of transuranic radioactive waste," said Dials. "In less than 60 days, we will be ready to take a critical first step in solving the defense nuclear waste disposal problem."

The readiness declaration comes on the heels of an intense Operational Readiness Review of the WIPP by 15 officials from other DOE sites and private companies. The review was a systematic inquiry into the ability of Westinghouse Electric Company's Waste Isolation Division to safely start transuranic waste disposal operations.

-More-

980402



-2-

In comments provided to the Carlsbad Area Office, the Operational Readiness Review team stated that the WIPP staff demonstrated the knowledge, attitude, and inquisitiveness required to ensure disciplined safe operations. The condition and readiness of the plant equipment and systems were demonstrated to be reliable. All required programs were found to be in place and effective.

The team identified the following strengths:

- A strong safety culture is in place.
- The management team is proactive and exhibits strong leadership qualities.
- Westinghouse demonstrated a strong, disciplined waste handling operation.

"Six minor pre-start findings were identified in the review process. All have been corrected, closed and verified," said Dials.

Once the EPA determines that the WIPP meets all applicable federal nuclear waste disposal standards, Secretary Peña will make a decision whether to proceed with transuranic waste disposal operations. Congress must then be notified. Waste operations can begin 30 days after that notification.

Initial waste shipments will come from Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, the Rocky Flats Environmental and Technology Site near Denver, Colorado, and the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory near Idaho Falls. There are more than 20 temporary storage sites for defense-generated transuranic waste nationwide.

Westinghouse is the management and operating contractor for the DOE at the WIPP.

The WIPP is designed to permanently dispose of transuranic radioactive waste left from the research and production of nuclear weapons. Located in southeastern New Mexico, 26 miles east of Carlsbad, project facilities include disposal rooms excavated in an ancient, stable salt formation 2,150 feet underground. Transuranic waste consists of clothing, tools, rags, and other disposable items contaminated with trace amounts of radioactive elements, including plutonium.

-30-

022DR0498