



Department of Energy  
Washington, DC 20585

*John St...*

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DATE: 5/13/98

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COMMENTS: FYI - WE ARE MAILING THE GOVERNOR  
a complete package, including the  
SECRETARY'S NOTIFICATION LETTER, today.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, PLEASE CALL-

PAGES: 3 INCLUDING COVER SHEET:

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**IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

May 13, 1998

**Energy Secretary Notifies Congress  
Waste Isolation Pilot Plant Ready to Open***Action Follows EPA Certification of Facility*

Secretary of Energy Federico Peña today notified Congress that the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) near Carlsbad, N.M. is ready to begin disposal operations. Secretary Peña's action follows the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) issuance of a certification of compliance for the WIPP earlier today. Publication of the EPA certification in the *Federal Register*, expected by May 20, will initiate a 30-day waiting period before WIPP shipments and disposal operations can begin. The opening date is set tentatively for June 19.

"Officially notifying Congress that the WIPP is ready for operation and has met all prerequisites has been a priority of this administration," said Secretary Peña. "Our action today culminates a 24-year process and marks a historic milestone in our nation's efforts to clean up the environmental legacy of the Cold War. I am proud of this achievement.

"The Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency both agree: the WIPP meets all federal disposal standards for transuranic radioactive waste and is ready to accept this defense-generated waste. The WIPP will be the first geological repository for defense-generated radioactive waste," Peña added. "With the opening of the WIPP, we will be taking a substantial step forward in the environmentally safe cleanup of the nation's former nuclear weapons production sites."

**( MORE )**

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... waste, which will require a permit to begin shipment and disposal.

Transuranic waste to be disposed of at the WIPP comes from the department's nuclear weapons production, dismantlement and research and development activities. This waste consists primarily of clothing, tools, rags, debris, residues and other non-liquid disposable items contaminated with trace amounts of radioactive isotopes, mostly plutonium.

The WIPP is a deep geologic repository, designed and constructed to provide underground disposal for the department's defense-generated transuranic waste. Located 2,150 feet below the earth's surface in an ancient bedded salt formation, the WIPP site occupies 16 square miles in southeastern New Mexico, 26 miles east of the city of Carlsbad.

As early as the 1950s, the National Academy of Sciences recommended disposal of radioactive waste in stable geologic formations, such as deep salt beds. Government scientists searched for an appropriate site during the 1960s, testing the area of southeastern New Mexico in the 1970s. In 1979, Congress authorized the WIPP, and the department constructed the facility during the 1980s.

A 1992 act of Congress transferred ownership of the land surrounding the WIPP to the Department of Energy. The 1992 act also established the Environmental Protection Agency as the regulatory authority that would certify whether the WIPP meets the applicable environmental regulations and standards.

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