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For Immediate Release

DOE to Hold Public Meetings On Draft Environmental Assessment

Carlsbad, N.M., October 26, 2000 – The public is invited to comment on a draft environmental assessment for conducting astrophysics and other basic scientific experiments at the U.S. Department of Energy's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP). The October 23 release of the draft environmental assessment begins a formal review process that includes a 30-day public comment period and two separate public information meetings.

Public meetings are scheduled for November 14 in Santa Fe and November 16 in Carlsbad. Written comments will be accepted through November 22.

The meetings are being held in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Each meeting will begin with a short presentation, followed by a question and answer period and opportunity for the public to provide verbal comments on the draft environmental assessment.

The Santa Fe public meeting will be held at the Holiday Inn, 4048 Cerrillos Road. The meeting will consist of two sessions – from 2 to 5 p.m. and from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. The Carlsbad meeting will take place at the Skeen-Whitlock Building, 4021 National Parks Highway, and also will include two sessions – from 2 to 5 p.m. and from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m.

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All written comments should be sent to Mr. Harold Johnson, NEPA Compliance Officer, U.S. Department of Energy, Carlsbad Field Office, P.O. Box 3090, Carlsbad, NM 88221. Mr. Johnson will also accept comments via e-mail at johnsoh@wipp.carlsbad.nm.us. Brief verbal comments may also be telephoned to the WIPP Information Center at 1-800-336-9477. Copies of the draft environmental assessment may also be obtained by calling this toll-free number.

The public can obtain more information on the draft environmental assessment by logging onto the WIPP Home Page, <http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us>.

WIPP, a cornerstone of the DOE's cleanup effort, is designed to permanently dispose of defense-generated 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 (almost one-half mile) underground. Waste disposal operations began at WIPP March 26, 1999.

Transuranic waste consists of clothing, tools, rags, debris, residues, and other disposable items contaminated with radioactive elements, mostly plutonium.