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For Immediate Release

Public Invited to Comment on Additional Proposed Modifications To WIPP Hazardous Waste Permit

CARLSBAD, N.M., April 26, 2000 – The public is invited to comment on additional proposed modifications to the hazardous waste facility permit for the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP).

Earlier this month, DOE and the Westinghouse Waste Isolation Division requested -- through three Class 2 permit modification submittals -- that the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) change certain provisions of the state permit. On April 20, DOE and Westinghouse submitted to NMED three additional Class 2 permit modifications.

The Class 2 submittals begin a formal review process that includes a 60-day public comment period and two separate public meetings. Written comments will be accepted by NMED on the permit modification requests by DOE and Westinghouse.

All written comments regarding the proposed Class 2 modifications should be sent to Steve Zappe, New Mexico Environment Department, 2044A Galisteo Street, Santa Fe, NM 87505. Zappe is also accepting comments by e-mail at steve_zappe@nmenv.state.nm.us.

Individuals attending the public meetings, scheduled for May 16 in Carlsbad and May 18 in Santa Fe, will be provided envelopes addressed to NMED for use in submitting comments on all Class 2 permit modifications. The comment period ends June 25.

WIPP's hazardous waste facility permit, issued last October by NMED, went into effect on November 26, 1999. The permit governs the disposal and handling of the "mixed" transuranic radioactive waste. Mixed waste consists of radioactive waste combined with

chemically hazardous materials such as cleaning solvents and lead. Most of the waste destined for disposal at WIPP is mixed.

Like the permit modification requests submitted on April 5, two of the three proposed Class 2 requests submitted by DOE on April 20 ask NMED to modify specific permit provisions that guide waste characterization and certification. Characterization and certification provide physical and chemical information about the waste.

The third Class 2 modification deals with requirements for detecting certain types of radiation in the groundwater in the vicinity of WIPP.

Fact sheets explaining each of the requested modifications, and an overview describing the differences between Class 1, 2 and 3 permit modification requests, are available by logging onto the WIPP Home Page at <http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us>. Additional information can be obtained by calling the WIPP Information Center, toll free, at 1-800-336-WIPP (9477). Copies of the hazardous waste facility permit are also available at either location.

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.