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For Immediate Release

Rocky Flats Resumes Shipments to WIPP

CARLSBAD, N.M., March 11, 2000 – The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has resumed transuranic radioactive waste shipments from DOE's Rocky Flats Environmental Technology Site (RFETS) to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP).

A shipment consisting of 28 drums of transuranic waste today arrived safely at WIPP at 5:07 p.m. (Mountain Standard Time). The truck, carrying two TRUPACT-II (Transuranic Packaging Transporter Model II) shipping containers, departed RFETS, near Golden, Colo., yesterday at 10:40 p.m. (MST).

This marks the 24th "non-mixed" waste shipment from RFETS to WIPP since waste disposal operations began on March 26, 1999.

"By resuming transuranic waste shipments, we continue to demonstrate our commitment to clean up and close Rocky Flats, and make good on our obligations to the state of Colorado," said Dr. Inés Triay, Manager of DOE's Carlsbad Area Office, which administers the WIPP program and oversees characterization and disposal of transuranic waste from 23 sites nationwide. "Further, it shows the American people that we are making real progress toward cleaning up the Cold War's legacy of nuclear weapons production -- and providing for safe, permanent disposal of transuranic waste."

Paul Golan, DOE's Deputy Manager at Rocky Flats, shared Triay's sentiments. "This is an important milestone for the closure of Rocky Flats," said Golan. "The credit goes to the workers of Rocky Flats and Carlsbad for meeting this tough challenge."

The waste shipment was routed around Carlsbad by way of the WIPP Relief Route, which was completed last year using primarily DOE funds. This was the first time the relief route was used for a WIPP shipment.

DOE temporarily halted waste shipments to WIPP last November to focus on implementing requirements of the WIPP Hazardous Waste Facility Permit, issued by the New Mexico Environment Department last October. This is the first waste shipment that was subject to the permit, issued under the New Mexico Hazardous Waste Act.

The Hazardous Waste Facility Permit governs the characterization and subsequent disposal of "mixed" transuranic waste that includes both radioactive waste and chemically hazardous components. All WIPP shipments to date have consisted of "non-mixed" or purely radioactive waste regulated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which certified WIPP in 1998. "Mixed waste" shipments are scheduled to begin later this year from the DOE's Hanford Site in Washington State.

Since opening March 26, 1999, WIPP has received 45 shipments of transuranic waste. Besides the RFETS shipments, 17 came from Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico and four waste shipments came from DOE's Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory near Idaho Falls, Idaho.

Rocky Flats will ultimately send about 2,000 shipments of transuranic waste to WIPP between now and the completion of the site's cleanup. During the expected 35-year operating life of WIPP, DOE will transport some 37,000 loads of transuranic waste to the repository from 23 locations nationwide.

The 705-mile trip from RFETS to WIPP took about 18 hours, including the time required for drivers to stop and inspect the truck every 100 miles or two hours. The inspection stops are performed in accordance with safety protocols developed by DOE and the Western Governors' Association.

Several years ago, DOE began working with the Western Governors' Association, states and tribes along WIPP transportation routes to prepare for waste shipments. Since 1988, more than 17,000 emergency response professionals, including more than 6,000 in Colorado and New Mexico, have been trained nationwide.

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.

For more information about WIPP, call 1-800-336-9477, or visit the WIPP Web site at <http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us>.