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For Immediate Release

WIPP Transportation Exercise to Test Emergency Response Capabilities for Midland-Odessa

CARLSBAD, N.M., January 10, 2000 – Emergency response agencies from Midland and Odessa, Texas, will take part in a 1 p.m. (CST) training exercise Jan. 12 at the Ector County Coliseum. The graded exercise will help agencies determine whether emergency personnel are prepared to respond to a possible accident involving a shipment of transuranic radioactive waste headed for the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP).

"This is an excellent opportunity for emergency responders to test the skills they've learned," said Dale Childers, assistant chief of the Odessa Fire Department and emergency management coordinator for Ector County. "It will also help us determine what improvements, if any, are needed to ensure area personnel are properly trained and prepared to react to any accident involving hazardous or radioactive materials."

Taking part in the training exercise will be emergency response personnel from the Midland and Odessa Fire Departments, Texas Bureau of Radiation Control, Odessa Police Department, Ector County Sheriff's Office, Ector County Emergency Management, Midland County Fire Marshall's Office, and Midland County Emergency Management.

Shipments of transuranic waste from DOE storage sites in the eastern United States are tentatively scheduled to begin this year and would travel U.S. Interstate 20 to Pecos, Texas. Trucks would then follow U.S.-285 into New Mexico en route to WIPP, located 26 miles east of Carlsbad.

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Emergency responders along WIPP transportation routes are offered training through the DOE's States and Tribal Education Program (STEP). The program, initiated in 1988, offers courses in responding to potential incidents involving waste shipments. Texas now handles most of its own emergency response training.

In 1993 and again in 1997, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration reviewed and concurred with all STEP courses. More than 17,000 emergency response personnel in 16 states have been trained through STEP, including more than 300 in Midland-Odessa and 1,400 in Texas.

Initial response to an actual incident would most likely come from local "first responders," such as state or local police departments, fire departments, and other emergency response personnel. State and local governments have emergency response plans that outline specific procedures for handling radioactive and hazardous materials transportation accidents safely and effectively.

Local first responders are trained in material identification, regulations, response procedures and personal protection. In the event of an accident, local responders would usually contact state public health agencies. If necessary, the appropriate DOE Radiological Assistance Team would respond, supported by the DOE Carlsbad Area Office Incident/Accident Response Team, which is on standby while transuranic waste shipments are in progress.

The Emergency Operations Center at DOE's Albuquerque Operations Office would take the lead role in any accident involving a shipment of transuranic waste, regardless of where the accident occurs. Response would be automatic and not contingent on a state request for assistance. The DOE maintains regional offices that can receive calls for assistance 24 hours a day and are prepared to send trained personnel and equipment to incident sites.

WIPP, a cornerstone of the DOE's cleanup effort, is designed to permanently dispose of defense-generated transuranic radioactive waste 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 our Web site at <http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us>.