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For Immediate Release

DOE Takes Steps to Complete Clean-Up of Argonne by 2003; Schedule for Shipping Waste to WIPP is 'Good News' for Illinois

CARLSBAD, N.M., May 15, 2000 – The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) reinforced plans to complete the clean-up of its Argonne National Laboratory-East site in Illinois by 2003 by accelerating its schedule for shipping transuranic waste to DOE's permanent disposal site in New Mexico. Previously, the shipments were not expected to begin before 2003.

Under the accelerated schedule, shipments to DOE's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) near Carlsbad, New Mexico, are expected to begin in Spring 2001 and be completed by the end of the calendar year. Characterization of the waste currently stored at Argonne will begin this October.

This agreement is a major step in honoring Argonne and DOE's commitment to the community to complete clean-up of the site by 2003. By moving and disposing the waste earlier, the last "legacy" waste from Argonne's former operations will be eliminated. Argonne will be able to concentrate on its research mission; and will save the cost of storing the TRU waste for several years.

Beginning in the Spring 2001, approximately 450 to 500 drums of TRU waste will be loaded into specially-designed transport containers that are certified by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The containers will be shipped on approximately 40 truck shipments.

"We plan to work closely with the Illinois Department of Nuclear Safety over the next year and a half to ensure these shipments are safe and to determine the best transportation route through Illinois to New Mexico," said Dr. Robert L. San Martin, Manager of the DOE Chicago Operations Office. "Beginning preparations for the shipments to WIPP is a major step in completing Argonne's clean-up, and real progress in safely managing the waste," he added.

"This plan to accelerate the clean-up of Argonne and shipment of transuranic waste to WIPP is good news for Illinois, and we will continue working with DOE to plan for safe shipping operations," said Thomas Ortiger, Director of the Illinois Department of Nuclear Safety. "To ensure the safety of our citizens, we will inspect and escort each shipment through the state, as we have for more than 460 other radioactive waste shipments since our escort program began in 1983." The shipment will be conducted by WIPP personnel using special trucks dedicated to ensure the safety of people and the environment.

WIPP, a cornerstone of the DOE's cleanup effort, is designed to permanently dispose of transuranic radioactive waste from atomic energy defense activities. Situated 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, including plutonium. Transuranic wastes at Argonne resulted primarily from a wide variety of research and development activities carried out there over many years.

Argonne National Laboratory is operated by the University of Chicago for the Department of Energy. Additional information about WIPP can be obtained by calling the WIPP Information Center, toll free, at 1-800-336-**WIPP** (9477).