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For Immediate Release **DOE to Hold Public Information Meetings On Proposed Permit Modification**

CARLSBAD, N.M., July 26, 2000 – The public is invited to comment on a proposed modification to the Hazardous Waste Facility Permit for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP). Submittal of the proposed modification to the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) begins a formal review process that includes a 60-day public comment period and two separate public information meetings.

In its request, DOE proposes to increase the aboveground storage capacity at WIPP by 25 percent, expand the aboveground storage areas and remove the time limit for temporarily storing waste aboveground at WIPP before it is disposed.

Additionally, DOE is requesting – for waste characterized at WIPP – to substitute an in-house, NMED-regulated assessment program for the current audit and surveillance program that is used at transuranic waste sites. The audit and surveillance program, as defined in the permit, is a redundant requirement for waste characterized at the WIPP facility because NMED has direct inspection and regulatory authority over hazardous waste activities at all regulated facilities in the state of New Mexico. DOE will continue to implement the permit audit and surveillance program at Los Alamos National Laboratory and transuranic waste sites outside New Mexico that characterize waste for disposal at WIPP.

These modifications are part of a proposed centralized waste characterization facility at WIPP that would be used in lieu of characterization facilities at sites with smaller inventories of transuranic waste. Characterizing and disposing of waste at WIPP is a safe and efficient option for accelerating cleanup of DOE sites nationwide.

Waste characterization is the process to identify and describe the physical, chemical, and radiological properties of transuranic waste. DOE uses this information to determine whether the waste meets regulatory requirements for disposal at WIPP. DOE can only dispose of waste at WIPP that meets specific disposal criteria defined in the Permit.

The proposed modification conforms to industry standards for handling hazardous materials and does not compromise the safety of the facility, its employees, or the public.

Informational meetings are scheduled for August 29, 2000, in Carlsbad, and August 31, 2000, in Santa Fe. Individuals attending the public information meetings will be provided envelopes addressed to NMED for use in submitting written comments. Written comments will be accepted through September 26, 2000.

All written comments should be sent to Mr. Steve Zappe, New Mexico Environment Department, 2044A Galisteo Street, Santa Fe, NM 87502. Mr. Zappe is also accepting comments by e-mail at steve_zappe@nmenv.state.nm.us, or he can be reached by telephone at (505) 827-2425.

The Carlsbad informational meeting will consist of one session – from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. – while the Santa Fe meeting includes two sessions – from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m., and from 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. The Carlsbad meeting will be at the Skeen-Whitlock Building, 4021 National Parks Highway. Residents living in northern New Mexico can learn about the proposed modification in Santa Fe at the Courtyard by Marriott, 3347 Cerrillos Road.

The public can obtain more information on the proposed permit modification by logging onto the WIPP Home Page, http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us/rcradox/rfc/com_menu, and from the WIPP Information Center, 4021 National Parks Highway, Carlsbad. The public can also contact Mr. Bob Kehrman at **1-800-336-WIPP (9477)**. Additionally, WIPP's compliance with the permit can be obtained from NMED.

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.