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For Immediate Release

DOE Seeks Independent Evaluation Of Remote-Handled Waste Program

CARLSBAD, N.M., July 24, 2001 – An independent panel of scientific and engineering experts will convene July 30 in Carlsbad to evaluate U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) plans for managing remote-handled (RH) transuranic (TRU) waste at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP).

DOE's Carlsbad Field Office has asked the American Society of Mechanical Engineers and the Institute for Regulatory Science to review its proposed RH-TRU waste program. The program must be approved by the New Mexico Environment Department and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency before DOE will be permitted to accept and dispose of RH-TRU waste at WIPP.

"Safety and compliance are our primary considerations in developing the plans for managing RH-TRU waste. Before we submit our program to state and federal regulators, we want an independent evaluation by the best minds in the country," said Dr. Inés Triay, Manager of DOE's Carlsbad Field Office.

The American Society of Mechanical Engineers is one of the nation's oldest and largest professional societies of engineers and scientists. Its collaborative partner, the Institute for Regulatory Science, was formed in 1985 to serve the public by evaluating whether the decisions of Congress, regulatory agencies, and the courts are based on the best available scientific information. The two organizations have conducted numerous peer reviews over the past five years.

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DOE operates under a compliance certification from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and a hazardous waste facility permit issued by the New Mexico Environment Department. Although WIPP was designed to dispose of all of the nation's defense-generated TRU waste, regulators have not yet approved RH-TRU waste operations—citing the need for a program that explained how the waste would be characterized for disposal. DOE expects to submit its RH-TRU waste program to both regulatory agencies this fall after the independent evaluation.

Currently, DOE only disposes of contact-handled (CH) TRU waste at WIPP. CH-TRU waste can be handled under controlled conditions without any shielding beyond the waste container itself. RH-TRU waste emits penetrating gamma and neutron radiation and must be handled and transported in casks that provide additional shielding. RH-TRU waste will constitute approximately four percent of the total volume of TRU waste to be disposed of at WIPP.

RH-TRU waste, which contains the same basic items as CH-TRU waste (clothing, tools, rags, etc.), requires additional shielding for shipment to and handling at WIPP. RH-TRU waste is not high-level waste. High-level waste (HLW) is waste from reprocessing spent nuclear fuel – HLW and spent nuclear fuel are prohibited, by federal law, from disposal at WIPP.

As part of the peer review, the panel will hear a series of technical presentations during a topical workshop at the Pecos River Village Conference Center. The workshop begins at 1 p.m. on Monday, July 30, and runs through Wednesday, August 1. Tuesday and Wednesday's sessions will start at 8 a.m. The workshop is open to the public.

The morning session on August 1 is reserved for presentations by members of the public. Those interested in participating, either as observers or presenters, should contact Sharon Jones at the Institute for Regulatory Science, 5457 Twin Knolls Road, Suite 408, Columbia, MD, 21045, for guidelines and a registration form. Ms. Jones may be reached by telephone at (301) 596-1700 or by fax number at (301) 596-1707. The deadline for returning registration forms is July 27.

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In an independent effort, the National Research Council Board on Radioactive Waste Management is also convening a new committee on WIPP made up of members of the National Academy of Sciences to evaluate DOE's proposed plan for managing and disposing of RH-TRU waste. This separate peer review is unrelated to the effort of the Institute for Regulatory Science.

WIPP, a cornerstone in DOE's cleanup effort, is the nation's first repository for the permanent disposal 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. RH-TRU waste is currently stored at ten DOE facilities around the country, including Los Alamos National Laboratory in northern New Mexico.

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

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