

U.S. Department of Energy
Carlsbad Field Office
Waste Isolation Pilot Plant
P.O. Box 3090
Carlsbad, New Mexico 88221

DOENews

Media Contacts:

Dennis Hurtt
U.S. Department of Energy
Carlsbad Field Office
(505) 234-7327

Robert St. John
Westinghouse Waste Isolation Division
(505) 234-7348
(800) 493-9768
<http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us>

For Immediate Release

DOE to Hold Public Information Meeting On Proposed Permit Modification

CARLSBAD, N.M., January 31, 2001 – 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 a public information meeting.

In its request, DOE proposes alternative methods of quality control for radiography, which is currently done through visual examination. The proposed alternative is Digital Radiography/Computed Tomography. The modification would allow DOE to take advantage of new technology that enables analysis of the contents of waste drums without having to open them. This would significantly lower the risk to workers, public health and the environment.

Currently, drums are randomly selected for visual examination. Digital Radiography/Computed Tomography is similar to a CAT scan used to aid doctors in diagnosing human ailments. The proposed modification is intended for application across the entire DOE Complex.

The proposed modification conforms to industry standards for handling hazardous materials and protects the safety of the facility, its employees and the public.

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A public information meeting is scheduled for March 6, 2001, in Carlsbad. The meeting will consist of one session at the Skeen-Whitlock Building, 4021 National Parks Highway, from 6-8 p.m. Individuals attending the public information meeting will be provided envelopes addressed to NMED for use in submitting written comments. Written comments will be accepted by NMED through April 2, 2001.

All written comments should be sent to Mr. Steve Zappe, New Mexico Environment Department, 2044A Galisteo Street, Santa Fe, NM 87505. 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) 827-1560, Extension 1013.

The public can obtain more information on the proposed permit modification by logging onto the WIPP Home Page, <http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us>, and from the WIPP Information Center, 4021 National Parks Highway or phone 1-800-336-WIPP (9477). Additionally, information on 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.

NOTE: See the attached fact sheet for additional details on this proposal.

DOE Proposes Modification to Hazardous Waste Facility Permit

Alternative Method for Quality Control of Radiography

Background

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has proposed a modification to its Hazardous Waste Facility Permit for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in support of the DOE cleanup effort.

As part of a Class 2 modification request, DOE proposes to use digital radiography and computed tomography as an alternative means to confirm radiography results. These proposed changes, which DOE submitted to the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) on January 24, 2001, will protect worker safety, public health, and the environment. NMED issued the original permit in October 1999.

DOE's main priority at WIPP is to safely dispose of transuranic waste from United States defense activities in a safe, environmentally sound and cost-effective manner, which will expedite cleanup of DOE facilities. Visual examination (VE) is the current method by which the results of radiography are confirmed. VE requires workers to open a percentage of drums to confirm the physical form of the waste and to verify that there are no prohibited items within the container.

What is proposed?

Recent improvements in technology make it possible to confirm container contents without opening them. DOE proposes to use high-resolution digital radiography and computed tomography (DR/CT) in place of VE. Using DR/CT will eliminate the potential for radiation exposure to workers, to the environment, and will minimize the generation of additional TRU mixed waste.

Digital Radiography/Computed Tomography

Technological advances in radiographic equipment for waste evaluation have increased the capability to accurately identify the physical form of the waste and to confirm the

absence of prohibited items without intrusive inspection. Advances such as high energy X-ray sources, highly sensitive detectors, digital radiography, and computed tomography will allow technicians to easily identify items in high-density waste, opaque containers, pipe overpacks, and lead-lined drums. The entire container can be viewed in three dimensions, and the container can be scanned in slices to allow more in-depth analysis of particular portions of the waste that are of interest.

What are the benefits?

The advantages of using digital radiography and computed tomography are far-reaching as DOE continues to characterize and confirm TRU mixed waste destined for disposal at WIPP.

- The number of containers that are opened is minimized
- The approach implements joint guidance from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission that was intended to reduce workers exposure to radiation
- This approach minimizes the amount of TRU mixed waste generated during waste characterization
- The modification reduces potential exposure to workers
- The change is consistent with National Academy of Sciences recommendations
- The modification maintains compliance with all of the quality assurance objectives in the permit, while reducing worker exposure

Comments

Comments may be sent to Mr. Steve Zappe, New Mexico Environment Department, 2044A Galisteo Street, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87505. They may also be e-mailed to **steve_zappe@nmenv.state.nm.us** or faxed to 505-827-1544. Only written comments will be accepted. A copy of the permit modification may be viewed or copied at the NMED offices of Mr. Steve Zappe.

For More Information

For more information about transuranic waste shipments and procedures, or to be placed on the WIPP mailing list, call the WIPP Information Center at 1-800-336-WIPP (9477). You also may visit the WIPP Home Page at <http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us>. The permit modification may also be viewed at the WIPP Information Center or via the WIPP Home Page.

If you prefer, write to:

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