

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

Susan Scott
Washington TRU Solutions LLC
(505) 234-7204
(800) 493-9768
<http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us>

For Immediate Release

Drum Involved in Idaho Incident Not Shippable to WIPP

CARLSBAD, N.M., August 14, 2003, 4:05 p.m. (MDT) – As communicated by the U.S. Department of Energy, and subsequently reported in the media, a fire occurred inside a drum of transuranic waste yesterday at the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory (INEEL) during drum venting operations. The drum involved in the venting incident was not shippable to WIPP as packaged. Sealed drums cannot be shipped to WIPP without venting. The drum in the incident had been sealed for 28 years and was being vented for safe handling, including storage and transportation on-site.

The transportation requirements imposed by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission dealing with flammable gases prevent this drum from being shipped to WIPP. These requirements are not eliminated, relaxed, or in any way affected by the language in Section 310 of Senate Bill S.1424. The Bill deals solely with eliminating unnecessary hazardous waste analysis requirements. Senate Bill S.1424 **DOES NOT** propose to eliminate any of the drum handling or transportation safety requirements for transuranic waste.

The incident involved hydrogen gas burning inside the drum. Hydrogen is a natural result of radioactive elements in contact with waste materials. Venting prevents this hydrogen buildup while the drum is being handled and transported. The Advanced

-More-

Mixed Waste Treatment Facility routinely processes drums that have been stored for many years (in some cases decades) with their drum lids sealed. The first step after retrieving the drums is venting.

WIPP, a cornerstone of the 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.