United States Department of Energy News

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For Immediate Release

DOE and Westinghouse to Hold Public Meetings On Proposed Modifications to WIPP Hazardous Waste Permit

CARLSBAD, N.M., April 7, 2000 – The public is invited to comment on proposed modifications to the hazardous waste facility permit for the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP).

On April 5, DOE and the Westinghouse Waste Isolation Division submitted three proposed permit modifications to the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED). The modifications do not concern issues raised in the DOE's appeal of some provisions of the permit. The submittals start a formal review process that includes a 60-day public comment period and two separate public meetings. Only written comments will be accepted by NMED.

All written comments should be sent to Mr. Steve Zappe, New Mexico Environment Department, 2044A Galisteo Street, Santa Fe, NM 87505. Zappe is also accepting comments by e-mail at steve_zappe@nmenv.state.nm.us. Individuals attending the public meetings will be provided stamped envelopes addressed to NMED for use in submitting comments. Meetings are scheduled for May 16 in Carlsbad and May 18 in Santa Fe. The comment period ends June 11.

The Carlsbad meeting will consist of two sessions — from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. and from 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. — at the Skeen-Whitlock Building, 4021 National Parks Highway. The Santa Fe meeting will also consist of two sessions — from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. and from 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. — at the Hilton of Santa Fe, 100 Sandoval Street.

WIPP's hazardous waste facility permit, issued last October by NMED, went into effect on November 26, 1999. The permit governs the disposal and handling of the "mixed" transuranic radioactive waste. Mixed waste consists of radioactive waste combined with hazardous constituents such as cleaning solvents and toxic metals such as lead. Most of the waste destined for disposal at WIPP is mixed.

DOE and Westinghouse have requested that NMED modify two requirements of the hazardous waste facility permit that govern waste characterization activities. The third modification proposal is a request to revise the acceptance criteria for two types of hazardous waste.

Characterization consists of activities that provide information about the physical and chemical properties of the waste. WIPP will only accept waste that meets specific criteria describing the chemical and physical makeup of the waste.

The proposed modifications are consistent with industry standards for handling hazardous materials and do not compromise the safety of the facility, the public, or its employees. Explanations of the requested modifications are as follows:

- The permit requires DOE to sample the headspace gas in all of the waste containers prior to their disposal at WIPP. Headspace gases are those gases that accumulate in the top of a waste container as the material inside decays. The sampling information is used to determine the quantity of volatile organic compounds (VOC) that might be released from the containers.

  Over the 35-year life of the project, WIPP will receive hundreds of thousands of waste containers.

  The permit requires that all containers in a waste stream be sampled for headspace gas. However, some waste streams do not contain VOCs and, therefore, sampling all containers should not be necessary. DOE proposes that

NMED reduce the number of containers required to be sampled for headspace gas under such conditions. The reduced number would be selected statistically to be representative of the waste stream. This proposal is described in two modification requests. The two conditions under which DOE would be allowed to reduce headspace gas sampling would be:

1) If the waste generator knows, based on information about the waste generating process, the waste does not contains VOC-related hazardous wastes, or

2) If the waste was subjected to a thermal process known to eliminate VOCs from the waste.

These modifications would allow waste to be characterized more quickly and efficiently, saving time and money. Less sampling also means less risk of injury or contamination to DOE workers doing the sampling.

- DOE also proposes that NMED revise the permit to revise criteria by which workers demonstrate the accuracy of the procedures and instruments they use to measure cresols and pyridine.

Cresols and pyridine are semi-volatile organic compounds (SVOCs). Both compounds can be hazardous to human health. For a site's waste to be acceptable for disposal at WIPP, the site must demonstrate the accuracy of its instruments and methods for measuring levels of cresols, pyridine, and other compounds. Accuracy limits are established in the permit. The permit application incorrectly used data for volatile organic compounds (VOCs) rather than using data for SVOCs to establish the accuracy limits for cresols and pyridine. Using these limits may unnecessarily exclude some wastes from disposal at WIPP.

The DOE proposes to modify the permit to use the correct accuracy limits for cresols and pyridine.

The public can obtain more information on the proposed permit modifications by logging onto the WIPP Home Page at http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us, or by calling the WIPP Information Center, toll free, 1-800-336-WIPP (9477). Copies of the hazardous waste facility permit, including brief fact sheets on the proposed permit modifications, can be found at either location. An overview of the permit modification process is also provided.

DOE administers WIPP, while Westinghouse is the management and operating contractor for DOE at WIPP.

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.

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