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For Immediate Release

WIPP Receives Waste Characterized With Mobile System

CARLSBAD, N.M., April 12, 2002 – The first shipment of transuranic waste characterized by the Central Characterization Project arrived Saturday (April 6) at the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP). The shipment came to WIPP from DOE's Savannah River Site in South Carolina.

The shipment was the eighth to WIPP from the Savannah River Site, but the first under the newly approved Central Characterization Project (CCP). The Savannah River Site received approval for the program in late February from DOE's Carlsbad Field Office, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED). The waste characterization system will bring more efficiency to the cleanup of defense-generated transuranic waste. Characterization is the process where the contents of waste drums are checked and approved before shipment to and disposal at WIPP.

"This is a major step for us toward optimizing the transuranic waste system," said Dr. Inés Triay, manager of the Carlsbad Field Office. "I congratulate my staff and our contractor team for tackling a complex process through innovative business practices."

The CCP team is comprised of Westinghouse TRU Solutions LLC, Los Alamos National Laboratory, and Mobile Characterization Services. The project uses a modular waste characterization system consisting of full disposal characterization equipment, a mobile loading system used to place drums of transuranic waste into TRUPACT-II shipping containers for transport to WIPP and a project office overseeing the operation.

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An audit was conducted to evaluate the adequacy, implementation and effectiveness of the process for characterizing retrievably stored contact-handled debris waste at the Savannah River Site in South Carolina. The EPA and NMED approved the process for its first use on a specific waste stream at the South Carolina facility.

"Gaining regulatory approval for this project and implementing it at Savannah River are the result of great teamwork," said David Haar, manager of the CCP. "Our group worked tirelessly toward this achievement."

The mobile loading operation aids generator sites in loading drums of waste into TRUPACT-II shipping casks. The operation was approved after completing intense surveillance and testing procedures to ensure that all requirements for shipping transuranic waste in TRUPACT-II shipping containers are met.

Although the project's use is currently limited to the Savannah River Site, DOE will seek approval for similar Central Characterization Projects at its other sites to characterize, certify and ship waste for disposal at WIPP. This program will aid the Department in achieving its goal of speeding the cleanup process around the nation in a safe and cost-effective manner.

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.

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