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For Immediate Release WIPP Sets Schedule for Facility Upgrades

CARLSBAD, N.M., November 21, 2008 – The U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Carlsbad Field Office (CBFO) plans to perform some of the most extensive facility upgrades to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) since its initial construction. The work, scheduled to begin November 23, includes at least six major projects on the surface and in the underground repository.

"We're looking forward to completion of the upgrades," says Dave Moody, CBFO manager. "The work we do will ensure continued smooth operations for many years into the future."

Following is a summary of the work to be performed:

- The ceiling in the area where waste arrives 2,150-feet underground will be raised approximately five feet to enhance the safety of workers and to provide added room for the operation of large equipment. The rock salt at WIPP moves in to fill opened areas at a rate of two to three inches per year. This process is called salt creep. After many years when openings have closed up too far, the walls, floor and ceiling must be mined back.
- A project to direct airflow is scheduled. Airflow in the underground repository is separated into designated pathways that can be controlled to provide fresh air to all areas of the mine. Airflow is adjusted based on several factors, including the operation of diesel equipment and salt particles in the air while mining.

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- Ground control work will be conducted along the main waste transport route to address salt creep. Movement of rock salt in the underground is closely monitored and preventative maintenance to stabilize walls and the ceiling is performed long before it becomes a safety issue.
- One of five exhaust fans that are integral to WIPP's ventilation system is to be renovated. The air intake system is capable of pulling 425,000 cubic feet per minute of air through the mine.
- An electrical substation that provides power to approximately one quarter of the site will be upgraded to enhance the electrical distribution system.
- A grapple hoist used in the remote-handled transuranic waste disposal process will be replaced. The grapple hoist is used to load canisters of remote-handled transuranic waste into a facility cask, which shields the waste in transport to the underground disposal area.

Although waste shipments to WIPP will be temporarily halted to accommodate maintenance activities, projects have been prioritized to allow the resumption of shipments as early as possible. CBFO expects the work to be completed by January 20, 2009.

The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant is a U.S. Department of Energy facility designed to safely isolate defense-related transuranic waste from people and the environment. Waste temporarily stored at sites around the country is shipped to WIPP and permanently disposed in rooms mined out of an ancient salt formation 2,150 feet below the surface. WIPP, which began waste disposal operations in 1999, is located 26 miles outside of Carlsbad, N.M.

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