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For Immediate Release

WIPP Completes First RH-TRU Shipment From VNC

CARLSBAD, N.M., September 18, 2009 – The U.S. Department of Energy's Carlsbad Field Office (CBFO), working with GE Hitachi Nuclear Energy at the Vallecitos Nuclear Center (VNC) near Sunol, California, completed the first shipment of remote-handled transuranic (RH-TRU) waste from VNC to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in the southeastern corner of New Mexico. The shipment safely arrived at WIPP early Friday morning.

The shipping campaign is expected to be completed in mid-November. The DOE estimates that about 30-40 RH shipments will be sent from VNC to WIPP. The packaging of the waste is ongoing and will continue through October.

The characterization, packaging and removal processes of waste at VNC were funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). CBFO and WIPP have received $172 million in ARRA funds to support cleanup activities across the DOE complex.

"ARRA has enabled DOE to significantly accelerate the process of de-inventorying TRU waste from small quantity TRU waste sites across the country, such as VNC, and help us fulfill our goal of reducing the nation's nuclear waste footprint," said CBFO Recovery Act Federal Project Director Casey Gadbury.

VNC is a privately-owned commercial energy research facility located approximately 40 miles east of San Francisco and about seven miles southwest of Livermore, California. The TRU waste was generated at VNC from government-sponsored research.

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WIPP's mission includes the safe disposal of two types of defense-related transuranic waste, contact-handled (CH-TRU) and remote handled (RH-TRU). The waste, a byproduct of the nation's nuclear defense program, consists of tools, rags, protective clothing, sludge, soil and other materials contaminated with radioactive elements that have atomic numbers greater than uranium.

RH-TRU waste emits more penetrating radioactivity than CH-TRU waste from the surface of the disposal container. The shipments are made in robust lead-lined casks certified by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, known as an RH-72B. These shipments, like every WIPP shipment meets all U.S. Department of Transportation requirements.

WIPP's drivers must pass stringent training requirements prior to transporting TRU waste for WIPP. Shipment protocols were developed through cooperative efforts with states, tribal governments and the U.S. Department of Energy. Shipments are also monitored, via satellite, at all times.

WIPP began disposing of RH-TRU waste in January 2007. VNC is the sixth site to ship RH-TRU waste to WIPP, following the Idaho National Laboratory, Argonne National Laboratory, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the Savannah River Site and Los Alamos National Laboratory. As of September 14, 2009, 276 remote-handled TRU waste shipments have been received at WIPP.

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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