

U.S. Department of Energy
Carlsbad Field Office
Waste Isolation Pilot Plant
P.O. Box 3090
Carlsbad, New Mexico 88221

Media Contact:

Dennis Hurtt
U.S. DOE Carlsbad Field Office
(505) 234-7327
<http://www.wipp.energy.gov>

DOENews

For Immediate Release

First Remote-Handled Transuranic Waste Shipment Arrives at WIPP

CARLSBAD, N.M., January 24, 2007 – The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) announced today the safe arrival of its first shipment of remote-handled (RH) transuranic (TRU) radioactive waste at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP).

The shipment, which originated at Idaho National Laboratory (INL), arrived Tuesday night at the WIPP site. The waste was transported inside a shielded RH-72B shipping cask, providing the same low radiation levels as the contact-handled (CH) TRU wastes that have been shipped to WIPP since 1999. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission certified the sturdy, lead-lined cask for WIPP use in 2000.

“This first shipment of RH-TRU waste is particularly significant to DOE,” says DOE Assistant Secretary for Environmental Management James Rispoli. “WIPP is now positioned to complete its entire mission. The safe, efficient disposal of all transuranic waste, including remote-handled material, is vital to our national clean-up strategy.”

The shipment from Idaho consisted of three 30-gallon drums of radioactive debris waste that resulted from research activities and testing of nuclear materials. The waste was generated at Argonne National Laboratory near Chicago, Ill., in 1993 and shipped to Idaho National Laboratory for storage.

Disposal of RH-TRU waste has long been part of the WIPP mission. In 1992, Congress

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authorized the disposal of both CH- and RH-TRU waste at the facility. In October 2006, the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) issued a revised hazardous waste facility permit for WIPP, specifying the final regulatory conditions for RH-TRU waste management and disposal at the facility.

Using a collaborative public process introduced by the NMED, parties to the permit including NMED, DOE, the WIPP primary contractor and several citizen interest groups, fashioned a revised WIPP hazardous waste facility permit approved in October 2006 by New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson and NMED Secretary Ron Curry, following a public comment period and subsequent public hearings.

“This important shipment was completed safely and uneventfully,” says Dr. David Moody, DOE Carlsbad Field Office manager. “This has been a team effort from the beginning.” Moody praised the collective efforts of state and federal regulators, project stakeholders and staffs at WIPP, Idaho National Laboratory and DOE headquarters.

In the months leading up to the first shipment, WIPP successfully completed a number of operational reviews to demonstrate readiness to manage and dispose of RH-TRU waste. A team of experts from DOE, NMED, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the federal Defense Nuclear Facility Safety Board participated in the reviews.

Before any waste generator site ships RH-TRU waste to WIPP, the EPA and NMED must approve the site’s procedures for characterization—the process for determining the physical and chemical characteristics of the waste—to ensure it is suitable and approved for disposal at WIPP. Both of those approvals have been obtained for characterization and certification of RH-TRU waste at the INL.

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.

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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 March 1999, is located 26 miles outside of Carlsbad, N.M.

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