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March 1, 2007
For Immediate Release

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Environment Department Reaches \$124,297 Settlement with NASA on Hazardous Waste Violations at White Sands Test Facility

(Santa Fe, NM) – The New Mexico Environment Department reached a settlement agreement for \$124,297 with NASA this week over improper hazardous waste management practices at the NASA White Sands Test Facility near Las Cruces.

The department found several violations at the facility during inspections in 2004 and 2005, including failure to keep adequate records of waste discharged into a waste treatment unit, neglecting to properly maintain and control erosion on covers on closed hazardous waste landfills and exceeding the maximum allowable volume of waste discharged into the treatment unit.

“I expect NASA to comply with measures in the settlement that are designed to ensure those types of violations do not occur again,” said Environment Department Deputy Secretary Cindy Padilla. “Hazardous waste regulations are in place to protect the health and safety of New Mexicans and strict compliance is a crucial component of that protection.”

The department reached the settlement with NASA on Wednesday. NMED inspectors also found other violations at the site, including failure to properly store and label waste lamps containing mercury, failure to properly analyze waste discharged into a treatment unit for fuels and failure to properly characterize waste shipped off-site for disposal. NASA generates various waste at the site, including spent solvents, ignitable wastes, and waste containing hydrazine, a rocket propellant. Waste at the test site is treated in several large tanks or stored at the facility prior to shipment to an off-site disposal facility. There are also several closed hazardous waste landfills at that location.

The settlement requires NASA to pay the civil penalty and take steps to correct the violations, including inspecting and maintaining landfill covers, creating diversion channels to limit erosion and keeping a log of wastes discharged into the treatment unit. The department issued Notices of Violation to NASA on May 3, 2004 and on Feb. 7, 2006. The department and NASA have since been in negotiations on the alleged violations.

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