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Gov. Bill Richardson and Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry Approve Major Changes to WIPP Permit

(Carlsbad, NM) — Gov. Bill Richardson and state Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry approved a modified permit for the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) today in Carlsbad.

The modifications allow several changes to the original permit, including the disposal of remote-handled transuranic (TRU) wastes and increased public access to waste information.

“This permit is the product of thorough, careful review and analysis. It involved open discussions between residents, concerned citizens’ groups, the scientists at the Environment Department, and DOE,” Gov. Richardson said. “This is the best possible permit. It both allows for the safe disposal of remote handled transuranic waste and – at the request of the environmental community – creates vastly better public access to information about the waste that is accepted at WIPP.”

“NMED spent a huge amount of time making sure that the health of New Mexico’s residents and our state’s environment is protected under the modified permit,” Secretary Curry said. “The permit also ensures NMED and residents the right to obtain information about operations at WIPP and potential impacts to health and the environment.”

DOE and Washington TRU Solutions, co-operators of the facility, requested changes to the permit. The permit allows the most major changes to operations at the facility since NMED issued the first permit to WIPP in 1999.

Other changes to the permit streamline the process of identifying and verifying the content of waste disposed of at the facility. The permit also allows increased storage of waste at the facility, including remote handled transuranic waste. Another revision calls for improved monitoring of the buildup of chemical compounds at underground disposal rooms to ensure the buildup does not lead to explosions. The permit also requires DOE and Washington TRU Solutions to notify citizens and organizations of audit reports, temporary increases in waste storage capacity and other information.

The permit is the result of negotiations between NMED, the state Attorney General's Office, D.O.E., Washington TRU Solutions, Southwest Research and Information Center, Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, Citizens for Alternatives to Radioactive Dumping and others.

The process of modifying the permit began when NMED issued a draft permit on Nov. 23, 2005. NMED held a public hearing on the draft permit May 31 in Carlsbad. NMED's hearing officer, who listened to technical testimony and public comment concerning the permit for more than a week during several meetings, recommended to Secretary Curry that he adopt the draft permit with the negotiated changes.

For more information, contact Marissa Stone, NMED Communications Director, at (505) 827-0314 or (505) 231-0475.

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