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Secretary Curry Renews Waste Isolation Pilot Plant Permit for 10 Years

(Santa Fe, NM) – New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry issued a final order today granting the renewal of the hazardous waste facility permit for the U.S. Department of Energy's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant east of Carlsbad. The permit goes into effect in 30 days.

The permit authorizes WIPP to continue managing, storing, and disposing of contact-handled and remote-handled transuranic waste resulting from nuclear weapons research, production, and environmental cleanup at facilities around the country. DOE and Washington TRU Solutions LLC., co-operators and joint permittees of the facility, have operated WIPP under a 10-year permit first issued by NMED in 1999. The renewal permit grants the facility another ten years of operations.

"The original permit − while protecting the citizens and environment of New Mexico − broke new ground by establishing a rigorous regulatory framework for the safe and efficient operations of this one-of-a-kind facility," Secretary Curry said. "The renewal permit is a substantial revision of the current permit, reflecting experience gathered by the department over the past 11 years and incorporating suggestions from WIPP, citizens' groups, and interested members of the public. I am proud that the renewal permit remains strong and enforceable, while providing even greater transparency and opportunities for public involvement."

The permit includes a new provision for an electronic information repository of WIPP documents accessible through the Internet on WIPP's home page. The permit further requires the permittees to establish a formal community relations plan developed in consultation with and annually reviewed by communities and interested members of the public. That plan will keep those parties informed of permit-related activities, explain how they can participate in them, and provide a mechanism for commenting on ways to improve communication. The permit also expands the list of specific actions and submittals by the permittees that will require e-mail notification to interested persons who have signed up on the WIPP home page. Finally, the permit provides more transparency when WIPP seeks to dispose of waste by relying more on knowledge than on chemical or physical sampling of waste containers. This "acceptable knowledge sufficiency determination" process now includes several new opportunities for public input prior to submittal of a request by the permittees to NMED for review and concurrence.

NMED issued a preliminary draft permit for public comment on April 27, 2010. The department then received comments from the permittees, several members of the public, and organizations representing members of the public. NMED, in order to minimize the length and scope of the public hearing, met with the permittees and other commenters in June to resolve issues raised in their comments and to reach agreement on a revised draft permit. The result of those negotiations was a greatly improved revised draft permit that had nearly unanimous support from diverse parties prior to the public hearing.

One notable issue raised by the permittees at the hearing concerned the allowable concentration of the carcinogenic compound carbon tetrachloride that has been released into the atmosphere from containers of highly organic waste emplaced underground at WIPP. Although NMED had raised the allowable concentration earlier this year following a reevaluation of carbon tetrachloride toxicity by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the permittees sought to increase the concentration by a factor of four. The new permit allows an additional increase but it is less than what the permittees sought.

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

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