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Environment Department Takes Action to Prohibit High-Level Sludge from WIPP Disposal

(Santa Fe, NM) —New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) Secretary Ron Curry today signed a permit modification approval for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) located near Carlsbad. This modification is designed to bar the disposal of high-level tank sludges at WIPP.

“This action gives New Mexico the clear authority to prevent any high-level sludge from coming to WIPP,” said Secretary Curry. “The clarification of these powers would not have been possible without the hard work of NMED’s staff and the leadership of Governor Richardson on this issue.”

The modification to WIPP’s permit ensures that this facility remains solely devoted to the disposal of transuranic waste. By modifying WIPP’s permit, any reclassified high-level waste, as well as tank sludge currently at DOE’s Hanford, Idaho National Environmental and Engineering Laboratory (INEEL) and Savannah River facilities, will remain prohibited from WIPP disposal unless DOE proves that the waste is not now and never has been high-level waste. This showing would occur through a subsequent permit modification.

This modification was submitted to NMED by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) on July 2, 2004. It was also subject to a 60-day public comment period. The permit modification signed today has been modified from the original DOE proposal to include a public suggestion to more clearly delineate which waste streams are prohibited.

“This is a perfect example of how the permit modification process should work,” said Secretary Curry. “The public’s suggestion to include a concise list of the prohibited high-level waste tanks at DOE’s Hanford, INEEL and Savannah River facilities was a good one. Free and open public comment has made this a stronger permit.”

NMED’s actions on this issue began with an October 2003 directive from Governor Richardson to address this issue. This action followed efforts by DOE to reclassify high-level wastes, possibly making them eligible for WIPP disposal.

In an October 2003 press conference the Governor stated: “This is about so much more than a fight over labels on drums. It is about promises that were made to the people of New Mexico when WIPP opened, and making sure those promises are kept.”

For further information contact Jon Goldstein, Communications Director, NMED at (505) 827-0314.

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