

SUMMARY KEY POINTS FROM THE CONTINUING WIPP EXPERIENCE

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1. The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) is not a suitable site for high-level waste or irradiated fuel from commercial reactors. WIPP was not designed for such waste, it was not characterized for such waste, and it is not technically suitable for such waste. Federal laws and regulations clearly prohibit such waste at WIPP, numerous agreements with New Mexico prohibit such waste at WIPP, the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) operating permit prohibits such waste, and there are innumerable promises that have been made to the people of New Mexico (and the nation) that no such wastes will ever come to WIPP. Any change in WIPP's mission to allow such waste would be strongly opposed. But the change also would severely undermine credibility of laws, regulations, and promises regarding other nuclear waste disposal facilities.
2. The next 20 years can demonstrate whether the federal government and its contractors, at the cost of billions of dollars, can safely operate WIPP to "start clean, stay clean"; can safely transport transuranic (TRU) waste through more than 20 states without serious accidents or release of radioactive or hazardous contaminants; can meet its commitments to clean up TRU waste at dozens of Department of Energy (DOE) nuclear weapons sites; and can safely close, decontaminate, and decommission the WIPP site.
3. WIPP has specific limits on the amount of TRU waste that it can dispose, and a limited amount of time that it is to operate. A technically, politically, and socially acceptable disposal program must be based on the amounts and types of wastes and the period of time that site(s) are to operate.
4. The WIPP site was selected when there were no health and safety disposal standards. A technically, politically, and socially acceptable disposal program must be based on health and safety standards for present and future generations that are developed through a robust public (state, tribe, citizen) involvement process and approved before any site(s) are selected.
5. Congress authorized WIPP in 1979 without providing for a state veto (that DOE officials had promised) and without providing for independent regulation. A technically, politically, and socially acceptable disposal program must include transparency, robust public involvement, positive acceptance from state and tribal governments, and independent regulation.
6. In January 1981, DOE announced that it would construct and operate WIPP. That decision was supported by numerous local (Carlsbad) officials, but was opposed by many state officials and the large majority of New Mexicans. As a result, WIPP's opening was delayed from the planned date of 1987 until March 26, 1999. A technically, politically, and socially acceptable disposal program must include continuing, robust involvement from affected communities as well as from critics and opponents.
7. For several more decades, most irradiated fuel will remain at or near its current reactor site locations. A technically, politically, and socially acceptable disposal program must include improved protection of radioactive waste stored at reactor sites.