

# No need for change in law to expand WIPP

**By DON HANCOCK**  
*Southwest Research and Information Center*

The Journal editorial board apparently is uninformed about commercial nuclear waste storage, as well as the status of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (May 17 editorial: "Look to WIPP for safe storage of nuke waste").

The commercial waste mentioned in the editorial and Rep. Steve Pearce's bill (HR 1879) is at West Valley, N.Y., along with high-level commercial waste. According to the Department of Energy and the state of New York, that radioactive garbage is monitored and safely stored and can remain so for decades until there is a commercial waste repository.

That waste, like more than 99 percent of the nation's radioactive waste, is never supposed to come to WIPP.

As of May 11, there are 86,798 cubic meters of transuranic (TRU plutonium-contaminated) nuclear waste from nuclear weapons disposed at WIPP. The legal limit is 175,564 cubic meters of waste, so less than half of that amount has been trucked to WIPP during the last 14 years.

Thus, Pearce's bill is based on a false premise that WIPP jobs are at stake because

there's little more defense TRU waste remaining. At the current shipping rates, there is at least 10 years of waste still stored at Los Alamos and four other major sites that is supposed to come to WIPP.

But because of the way WIPP has been managed over the past 14 years, it will fail in part of its mission.

Five percent of that legal volume limit, 7,079 cubic meters, can be remote-handled waste. Such waste is more radioactive than the other waste and must be shielded to reduce the amount of exposure to workers at WIPP and to the public during transportation.

As of May 11, 580 cubic meters of remote-handled waste was emplaced at WIPP. If all of the remaining remote-handled-designated space is used, the actual capacity is less than 3,500 cubic meters, which is less than half of the legal limit.

Apparently, a lot of remote-handled waste will be staying at Hanford, Wash.; Oak Ridge, Tenn.; and the Idaho National Lab because it will not fit into WIPP.

Rather than changing the law to expand WIPP, as the Journal and Pearce advocate, Congress should investigate why WIPP is failing its remote-handled waste mission.