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WHY WIPP IS NOT THE PLACE FOR SPENT NUCLEAR FUEL AND HIGH-LEVEL WASTE

In light of the demise of the proposed Yucca Mountain, Nevada repository, some people are once again considering the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) for storage or disposal of commercial spent nuclear fuel (SNF) or defense high-level waste (HLW). Following are a few of the many reasons to reject any such proposal.

1. New Mexicans have repeatedly said *NO* to SNF and HLW at WIPP.

At WIPP Environmental Impact Statement hearings in 1979, 1989, and 1997, at various congressional hearings, at numerous other public meetings, in public opinion polls, and at many statements until today, New Mexicans have overwhelmingly opposed SNF and HLW at WIPP. Numerous elected officials, including governors, attorneys general, senators, and representatives have also opposed SNF and HLW at WIPP. Public activities, political action, litigation, and other measures would be taken to stop SNF and HLW transportation, storage, or disposal.

2. Federal law prohibits SNF and HLW at WIPP.

In response to the public opposition to SNF and HLW, the WIPP Land Withdrawal Act of 1992 (LWA, Public Law 102-579, Section 12) states:

BAN ON HIGH-LEVEL RADIOACTIVE WASTE AND SPENT NUCLEAR FUEL.

The Secretary [of Energy] shall not transport high-level radioactive waste or spent nuclear fuel to WIPP or emplace or dispose of such waste or fuel at WIPP.

3. WIPP is not technically suitable for SNF and HLW.

Many scientists for decades have considered salt to have serious deficiencies in comparison to some other geologic formations for SNF and HLW because such heat-generating waste can rapidly deform salt and create instability that could endanger workers and release radioactivity. In addition, the WIPP site is surrounded by active oil and natural gas production facilities and reserves underlie the waste disposal area, which can result in breaches and releases of radioactivity. Pressurized brine reservoirs also underlie the waste disposal area, which could result in waste being transported to the surface, if a pathway is created.

4. WIPP apparently will fail in its remote-handled waste mission, so it could not safely handle additional and much more radioactive SNF and HLW.

WIPP's mission includes disposal of up the 7,079 cubic meters of remote-handled (RH) transuranic waste that requires shielding to limit radiation exposure to workers and the public. Because of management problems, there is only enough underground disposal space for about half of the RH capacity. HLW and SNF are tens to thousands of times more radioactive than RH waste, so WIPP could not safely handle those much higher radiation levels.