



Shell Game with Plutonium-Contaminated Waste a Poor Policy

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PRESS RELEASE

Diversion of Resources to WIPP Repository Endangers Water Resources in the West and May Compromise Future Security

Takoma Park, Maryland, March 25, 1999: The Institute for Energy and Environmental Research today strongly criticized the Department of Energy's decision to ship drums of radioactive waste from Los Alamos National Laboratory to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in Carlsbad, NM. WIPP is supposed to act as a repository for retrievably stored TRU waste from across the DOE nuclear weapons production complex.

"The festering problem of buried transuranic waste has been given a low priority compared to the relatively safely stored above-ground wastes," said Dr. Arjun Makhijani, President of IEER. "This is despite the fact that buried waste are threatening some of the most precious water resources in the United States, including the Columbia River and the Snake River Plain Aquifer (which is a sole source aquifer)." The WIPP repository would only be able to handle waste which has been stored above-ground or results from current and future nuclear weapons activities. There are currently no repository plans for the much larger amount of waste which was buried in various dumps and trenches across the DOE nuclear weapons complex.

There are also security concerns which WIPP cannot address, according to IEER. Plutonium 239, which is a fissile material used in making nuclear weapons is present in significant concentrations in some buried TRU waste. "The long-term implications of leaving plutonium in shallow dumps has never been adequately addressed," stated Dr. Makhijani. "These dumps could become plutonium mines if institutional control is lost over the coming hundreds or thousands of years."

WIPP has recently been licensed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to receive transuranic waste, but has not yet received a license to receive waste known as "mixed waste," which is a mixture of radioactive waste and chemicals regulated under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), the US hazardous waste law. DOE has argued that the current shipments contain only radioactive material and no hazardous materials.

"Our analysis showed that LANL had failed to properly take into account the chemical changes, known as radiolysis, which can convert some non-hazardous materials into hazardous compounds," explained Hisham Zerriffi, a Project Scientist at IEER. According to IEER's analysis, radiolysis could have created certain chemical compounds in high enough concentrations to meet the RCRA definition of hazardous



waste, in which case the shipments would violate RCRA. “The DOE simply hasn’t done its homework on this issue carefully enough,” added Mr. Zerriffi.

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Also available on this website:

- [Containing the Cold War Mess](#)
- [High-Level Dollars, Low-Level Sense](#)
- [WANTED: Sound Radioactive Waste Management Policy](#)(SDA Vol. 6 No. 1, May 1997)
- [Review of documents relating to the proposed shipments of LANL TA-55-43 Wastes to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant](#), IEER report, June 5, 1998