

For release on delivery  
10:00 a.m. MDT  
July 18, 2011

Statement by

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before the

Radioactive and Hazardous Materials Committee

New Mexico Legislature

July 18, 2011

Room 307, the New Mexico State Capitol

## Introduction

Mr. Chairman, vice-chairman, and members of the Advisory committee, thank you for your time and commitment to New Mexico's safe handling of hazardous materials. Also, thank you for inviting me to appear before your committee today in regards to H.R. 2367, the Government Waste Isolation Pilot Plant Extension (WIPP Extension) Act of 2011.

There are a tremendous number of tough questions facing our nation's energy future. As Members of the Radioactive and Hazardous Materials Committee, you are on the front-line in studying and recommending policy proposals for the role New Mexico will continue to play in our nation's evolving energy policy.

The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) is a world-class facility with an outstanding service record for the disposal of low-level defense-mission transuranic (TRU) waste. Many Americans are unaware that the WIPP facility exists or that our nation has a proven, capable facility that continues to safely process and store low-level radioactive material. This facility is the model on which radioactive waste disposal sites should be built and maintained. WIPP has safely received nearly 9,750 shipments and removed 76,000 cubic meters of waste from our biosphere. Nineteen sites have been cleaned of legacy TRU waste because of WIPP and the tremendous work being performed there.

WIPP builds upon New Mexico's central role in the infancy of atomic research, and brings the work done at several Department of Energy (DOE) facilities full-circle. In 1979, Congress authorized WIPP to research and develop a safe method for the disposal of radioactive waste. Twenty years later, WIPP accepted and processed its first shipment of TRU waste from the Los Alamos National Laboratory, and currently accepts waste from fourteen DOE laboratories and sites for storage.

TRU waste is generated when an item or substance is exposed to a man-made element with an atomic number higher than uranium on the Periodic Table of Elements. This is waste that most commonly has come into contact with plutonium including tools, clothing, debris, soil and other similar items. WIPP is a desirable location for TRU waste. The naturally occurring salt beds provide a unique environment that will absorb waste and prevents the release of radioactivity. Over time, the salt beds will move and change to entomb the waste 2,150 feet underground.

The facility is fast approaching its mission conclusion. The original expected closure date was 2037. That date has stepped up considerably. More pressing though is the change expected in the next four to five years. Currently, WIPP averages approximately 26 shipments per week. By 2015, WIPP is expected to see shipments begin falling off to roughly 16 shipments per week. By 2020, WIPP will receive only 14 shipments per week. As the number of shipments decline, so too will many well-paying, highly-skilled jobs. The WIPP facility employs approximately 200 miners and 300 technically skilled workers. These jobs provide southeastern New Mexico, particularly the Carlsbad community and Eddy County, a tremendous economic boost. As WIPP winds down over the next decade, the impact will surely be felt in New Mexico. What can be done to prevent this?

WIPP has utilized only 43% of the available mined area of the facility. According to the operations team at WIPP, there is more than enough room for the facility to handle and process additional TRU waste. The labs and other DOE sites around the country are holding TRU waste because it lacks a disposal stream. One stream of TRU waste is no different than the other, what

is dissimilar is the mission under which the waste was generated. Non-defense waste is a prime candidate for WIPP, as it poses no greater risk to public health than the defense-mission waste.

H.R. 2367 will supplement the defense-mission at WIPP by allowing the facility to accept all federal TRU waste. This additional waste stream is expected to keep shipments into the facility relatively stable for an additional five to seven years.

According to DOE, the overall mission of WIPP and the National TRU program is to protect human health and the environment by safe management, retrieval, characterization, and disposal of approved wastes. The legislation will clean up waste in eight states, with one of them being New Mexico. This is waste that, for no other reason than it was created under a non-defense mission, has no disposal process.

Finally, taxpayers will get a greater return on their investment in WIPP. As stated earlier, WIPP has currently utilized 43% of the facility. WIPP will not achieve 100% capacity, leaving taxpayers' investment underutilized. The characteristics for the new stream of waste are exactly the same as those currently accepted at WIPP. Without a pathway, this waste is doomed to sit in storage at various DOE facilities in sub-standard and less environmentally sound storage.

To conclude and summarize, the WIPP Extension Act (H.R. 2367) will:

- Not change the kind of waste that WIPP accepts
- Clean up transuranic waste in 8 states
- Allow for the safe disposal of 4,000 cubic meters of waste that would otherwise sit in temporary storage
- Piggyback on the exemplary record at WIPP to safely dispose and remove additional TRU waste from the environment
- Not change the existing transportation routes to bring waste to WIPP
- Stop the dramatic cut in shipments expected in roughly 5 years
- Prevent the loss of 200 well-paying, highly-technical jobs
- Provide the taxpayer with a better return on investment by utilizing space that is expected to go unused under WIPP's current, defense only mission
- Protect human health and the environment

Again, I thank you for inviting me to participate today. I look forward to discussing this legislation and answering any questions you may have.