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*DOE Yucca Mountain Office Announces Silicosis Screening Program  
for Current and Former Yucca Mountain Workers*

**LAS VEGAS, January 15, 2004**—The U.S. Department of Energy’s (DOE) Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management (OCRWM) today announced the initiation of a voluntary Silicosis Screening Program for current and former workers at the Yucca Mountain Project in Nevada. Specifically, the program is being offered, free of charge, to project employees who were involved in tunneling and underground operations, as well as the set-up of experiments in the Exploratory Studies Facility from 1992 to present.

Silica is one of the minerals that naturally exist in the desert soils and in the rocks at Yucca Mountain. Silica can become airborne during dust-producing activities such as tunnel boring operations. If inhaled, silica can collect in the respiratory system and, with long-term exposure, can cause a chronic, progressive lung disease called silicosis. The most visible symptoms of this disease are coughing and shortness of breath.

Regulatory limits for airborne silica were exceeded at various times during the tunnel mining operations at Yucca Mountain from 1992 to 2000. During early work at the site, respiratory protection was available but requirements for its use were not consistently applied. Some workers may have been exposed to airborne silica.

“We believe offering this screening to our current and former workers is the right thing to do and that measures now in place at Yucca Mountain are protecting current workers,” said Dr. Margaret S.Y. Chu, Director of OCRWM. Management established this Silicosis Screening Program as a response to employee concerns regarding their work environment.

“We will continue to emphasize a safety conscious work environment for all of our employees. I commend the workers who brought the need for this program to the attention of management. We look forward to maintaining the strong line of communication between management and employees, and we encourage everyone working on the project to bring their ideas and concerns to the management team,” Chu said.

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Under an existing DOE contract, a consortium led by the University of Cincinnati is conducting the Silicosis Screening Program. DOE will provide names of former workers to the University of Cincinnati, who also will work with The Center to Protect Workers' Rights to send general inquiries to trade unions to locate former Yucca Mountain workers. This partnership with organized labor should facilitate communication with former workers to make them aware of the program. The Silicosis Screening Program includes worker notification, a work history interview, and a medical examination. It is estimated that 1,200-1,500 workers may be offered participation in the program.

At the beginning of the tunnel mining operations in 1992, workers were issued dust masks as protective equipment for silica exposure. In the early years, use of respiratory protection was not consistently applied. In 1995 and 1996, tunnel ventilation and dust control practices were enhanced. Additionally, in 1996, monitoring of workers for silica exposure was expanded. Since 1996, management has focused on ensuring proper use of respiratory protection equipment.

In 1998, DOE established a Silica Protection Program to provide medical evaluations for current workers who spend more than 20 days underground per year. Evaluation includes a chest X-ray, as well as the standard medical exam, spirometer analysis, and other tests. Since 2000, there were two separate incidences in which workers were exposed to elevated silica concentrations during a single work shift. However, current studies indicate that health effects from silica are due to long-term, repeated exposures.

Current procedures for respiratory protection, ventilation and dust reduction, air monitoring, and exposure screening meet regulatory requirements. The program DOE is announcing today supplements the program begun in 1998 by extending medical screening services to former Yucca Mountain Project workers. Current workers may participate in the program if they so choose.