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DEFENSE NUCLEAR FACILITIES SAFETY BOARD

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May 6, 1999

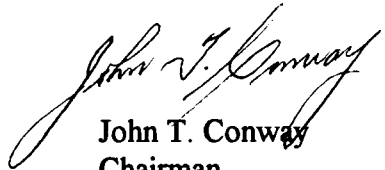
The Honorable Bill Richardson
Secretary of Energy
1000 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20585-1000

Dear Secretary Richardson:

As documented in the enclosed report, the staff of the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (Board) observed the receipt and emplacement of the first transuranic (TRU) waste shipment at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) during the period March 26-30, 1999. The staff found that WIPP operations in emplacing that initial shipment from the Los Alamos National Laboratory were conducted in an exemplary manner. The Board compliments the Department of Energy (DOE) on a job well done.

The Board believes that expeditious consolidation at WIPP of TRU waste distributed throughout the DOE defense nuclear complex will substantially improve protection of public health and safety, including that of workers, and is in the best interest of the nation. We look forward to full-scale WIPP operations. The Board is pleased, therefore, to note that the first shipment of TRU waste from a second site, the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory, was received at WIPP on April 28, 1999. We commend you on your prompt effective action to resolve this issue.

Sincerely,


John T. Conway
Chairman

c: Mr. Mark Whitaker, Jr.
Mr. Joseph Arango

Enclosure

DEFENSE NUCLEAR FACILITIES SAFETY BOARD

Staff Issue Report

April 1, 1999

MEMORANDUM FOR: G. W. Cunningham, Technical Director
J. K. Fortenberry, Deputy Technical Director

COPIES: Board Members

FROM: D. Winters

SUBJECT: Observation of First Waste Receipt and Disposal Placement at Waste Isolation Pilot Plant

This report documents the observations of D. Winters of the staff of the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (Board) regarding the first receipt and disposal of waste at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) during March 26–30, 1999. The purpose of this review was to confirm that readiness to operate safely had been maintained at WIPP since completion of the Department of Energy (DOE) March 1998 Operational Readiness Review (ORR) and September 1998 Integrated Safety Management System (ISMS) Verification Review.

WIPP had been physically ready to receive and dispose of this waste for more than a decade. The 1998 ORR and ISMS reviews demonstrated that WIPP was ready to operate safely. Observation of those reviews capped 8 years of WIPP reviews by the Board's staff. Based on its reviews and observations, the staff concluded that WIPP could be operated safely. The Board expressed the same conclusion in its December 7, 1998, declaration to the Washington, D.C., District Court (Judge Penn).

On March 25, 1999, the first transuranic waste shipment departed Los Alamos National Laboratory for WIPP. The shipment arrived at approximately 3:50 a.m. and, following an entry radiological survey, was passed through the main gate at about 4:25 a.m. Beginning at 7:30 a.m., the first transuranic packaging transporter (TRUPACT) was removed from the trailer and taken into the Waste Handling Building, where it was opened using well-rehearsed procedures. The two standard waste boxes (SWBs) contained in the TRUPACT were surveyed, found to be free of radioactive contamination, and staged for transfer to the underground. This activity was completed by 10:30 a.m. Following a break for debriefing of the waste handlers and for lunch, the two SWBs were transported via the waste hoist to the underground. From the underground hoist station, the waste was moved by diesel transporter to Room 7 of Panel 1 for disposal placement. Placement was successfully completed at 1:30 p.m. No difficulties were encountered, and years of training and practice were evident throughout the operation. Even the potentially distracting presence of the news media caused no difficulties for the operation.

Subsequently, on March 29, 1999, the two remaining TRUPACTs were moved into the Waste Handling Building and unloaded, and the four SWBs contained therein were staged for transport to the underground. On March 30, 1999, the four SWBs were taken underground and transported to Room 7 of Panel 1, where emplacement was completed at about 9:55 a.m.

Formal opening ceremonies are planned for April 17, 1999. The staff plans to return to WIPP later in 1999 to observe routine operations following ramp-up to a higher throughput, and to review DOE plans for the future disposal of remote-handled transuranic waste.