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## NATIONAL NEWS

# EPA licenses nuclear waste dump

*There will be a 30-day waiting period before Cold War refuse is hauled to New Mexico*

By Sue Majot Holmes  
The Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — A nuclear waste dump carved out of ancient salt beds under the New Mexico desert finally got its federal license Wednesday, 24 years after it was proposed, meaning truckloads of Cold War refuse could begin rolling in next month.

In a long-anticipated ruling, the Environmental Protection Agency licensed the \$2 billion Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, or WIPP, 26 miles outside of Carlsbad.

Energy Secretary Federico Pena promptly notified Congress that his department intends to open the repository — starting the clock ticking on a 30-day waiting period before shipments can begin traveling the nation's highways.

And just as expected, environmentalists promptly promised a court fight to halt the opening of the 2,150-foot-deep repository, which has been ready for a decade.

Environmental groups question the safety of hauling radioactive waste across the country by truck and the Energy Department's finding that brine pockets in the salt couldn't allow radioactivity to escape to the surface.

Federal officials said they're confident they can win any legal battle and that they've done everything possible to ensure the repository is safe.

The repository's opening would be "a major milestone in our nation's efforts to clean up the environmental legacy of the Cold War," said James Owendoff, the Energy Department's acting assistant secretary for environmental management.

"WIPP is the right place for the permanent disposal," he said. "It is in an isolated area where salt formations ... have remained geologically stable for more than 220 million years."

Scientists chose to bury the waste in the salt bed of a former ocean partly because salt creeps over time. Once a repository room is filled with waste, nature will be allowed to take its course: in seven to nine years, the room's roof and walls will collapse, encapsulating the waste.

Opponents question the Energy Department's finding that brine pockets in the salt won't allow radioactivity to escape to the surface and assumptions that state-of-the-art oil and gas drilling near the repository wouldn't accidentally breach it.

Still, Jim Channell, of the Environmental Evaluation Group, an independent state watchdog, said the license was expected.

"We think it's probably a reasonable decision, and you can't wait until everything is perfect on actions on this or you'll never get started," he said.

Supporters in Carlsbad say the repository has created hundreds of good paying jobs in the city of 27,000 and led to better roads, an influx of educated people, and a center that helps laid-off potash and oil workers train for new jobs.

Mayor Gary Perkowski said he's happy the process is nearing an end.

"The citizens of Carlsbad have worked hard for years keeping this project on the front burner in Congress and the state Legislature," he said.

The EPA certified the facility can safely bury plutonium-contaminated clothing, tools, equipment and sludge generated as a byproduct of decades of nuclear weapons work.

Over WIPP's estimated 30-year life, it would receive about 37,000 shipments, largely from federal sites in California, Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Nevada, New Mexico, Ohio, Tennessee, South Carolina and Washington.

The first truckload would come from Los Alamos National Laboratory in northern New Mexico, with later loads coming from Rocky Flats in Colorado and the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory.

## New York cabbies go on strike for a day

*The protest was spurred by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's campaign to make the city more civil*

By Tim Whitmire  
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — You want nice? We'll show you nice. Thousands of New York taxi drivers went on strike Wednesday in a one-day protest against proposed new rules aimed at making cabbies more courteous.

The strike brought unaccustomed quiet to the city's streets but meant big headaches for many New Yorkers and visitors, some of

whom gave up looking for a cab and either walked or took the subway or the bus.

"It's an inconvenience," said Tom Blum, 39, of Manhattan, who was among those who had to wait in long lines for a cab at LaGuardia Airport in Queens. "The taxi system is one of the aspects of New York you can always count on."

The city has 12,200 cabs. Police said only about 200 were on the streets of Manhattan.

The "yellow flu" was prompted by tougher rules proposed last month as part of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's campaign to make the city more civil.

The Taxi and Limousine Com-

mission is proposing drug tests for drivers, a ban on smoking and blaring music, and fines of up to \$150 for ignoring or cursing customers. Other fines would triple or quadruple, some escalating to license revocation. The commission votes on the rules May 28.

Biju Mathew, a strike organizer for the taxi drivers, who are not unionized, said the cabbies want more respect and a hand in rule-making.

"If these rules pass, I'll have to go on welfare," said Jaisin Ahmed, who has driven a cab for five years.

The mayor said the drivers' attempt to bring the city to a halt had backfired.

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