

THE WIPP DECISION PLAN: CHARTING THE COURSE
FOR OPENNESS IN THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS

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EXTENDED SUMMARY

The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) project has a history of changing expectations and changing criteria. More often than not, the impact of these changes was to decrease the amount of control the Department of Energy (DOE) has in the ultimate decision making process. As the rules changed, the ability to effectively plan for the opening of the WIPP also became more complicated. The effect of stronger and more powerful public participation was having an impact never before dealt with on a reasonably benign government project.

In June of 1989, the Secretary of Energy requested that a plan be developed that would clearly outline the prerequisites to opening the WIPP. It was to provide the basis for a decision making process that was not only visible to the public, but one which included public participation. It must also be dynamic enough to effectively deal with the changing legislative, regulatory, and technical environments.

The decision making plan ultimately developed for the WIPP defined a new process that is likely to impact the decision making process for future, major activities, internal and external, to the Department of Energy. In the past, decision making by the government and industry alike was made in the privacy of the "board room." Public comment, let alone participation, was virtually unheard of.

Based on a recognized need for openness, the Secretary's Draft Decision Plan was developed. The plan charted the course for ultimately making the decision to declare WIPP ready to receive waste for the start of test phase operations. It outlined to critics and supporters alike the rigorous and thorough process by which the internal decisions were made. The plan identified all internal prerequisites to the decision; charted the review cycles, and targeted the completion dates. It also outlined the processes outside the control of the Department, institutional issues, such as legislative land withdrawal, issuance of permits, and designation of transportation routes. It is a dynamic plan that over time provided "snapshots" of where the project was and where it is going. It removed the mystery and secrecy of the internal decision making process, turned the process public, and held the DOE accountable. This precedent setting approach is likely to be repeated as we realize that public acceptance through participation during the early stages of any project, be it waste management or siting an industrial facility, will likely be the only route to success.

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Starting with Revision 0 in October 1989, the plan evolved through an iterative process, accounting for completion of prerequisites, the addition of new ones, and the ever-changing regulatory and legislative environment. Throughout the process, the plan remained a guiding document, tracking progress along with setbacks, and providing historical documentation. It stands on its own as documentation of the rigor and thoroughness that support the decision to start test phase operations at the WIPP.

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