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NEWS MEDIA CONTACT:
Christina Sankey, 202/586-5806

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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WIPP BLUE RIBBON PANEL MEETS WITH ENERGY SECRETARY

Secretary of Energy James D. Watkins met with the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) Blue Ribbon Panel on Tuesday, October 24, 1989 to discuss the reports the Panel had submitted. The Panel reports provided astute, implementable recommendations which will be factored into the decision process for WIPP.

The WIPP Blue Ribbon Panel was formed, as part of the Secretary's initiative to consider the advice of independent groups, to provide an independent, technical review of WIPP operational issues. The Blue Ribbon Panel was announced in conjunction with the Secretary's 10-Point Initiative to strengthen environmental protection and waste management activities. The Panel's five members are:

Dr. Thomas Bahr, Director of the New Mexico Water Resources Research Institute;

Mr. Robert Bishop, Chief Counsel and Corporate Secretary, Nuclear Management Resources Council;

Dr. Arthur Kubo, BDM International Vice President;

Mr. Leonard Slosky, a Denver, Colorado environmental consultant; and

Mr. Newal Squyres, a Boise, Idaho attorney.

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ADD: Eileen Taylor, 4H-3

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The members of the Panel presented a range of opinions about the concept and timing of WIPP Test Phase activities both for Performance Assessment and Operations Demonstration. They all agreed that Performance Assessment testing, with actual waste emplacement, should begin as soon as legally possible and that Performance Assessment will be an interative process which must be integrated with any changes in production processes, waste forms, waste treatment, or regulations. Members of the Panel disagreed about the timing of full-scale Operations Demonstration when significant quantities of waste are emplaced. They all agreed that operational experience will begin with receipt of waste for Performance Assessment and that no opportunity to assess operational parameters should be overlooked.

An October 19, 1989 letter from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Nuclear Materials providing the Agency's comments on the Draft WIPP Test Plan states, "that DOE should carefully evaluate the feasibility of loading two full-scale rooms with waste and backfilling and sealing them during or immediately after the Test Phase. This would allow the Department to collect some realistic, integrated data about waste/backfill/repository interactions as well as gaining valuable experience with backfill materials and procedures." The Panel and the EPA agree that testing with actual waste is required to collect the data necessary to show compliance with environmental regulations (40 CFR 191, 40 CFR 286).

The opinions of each Panel member as well as he comments of EPA, the Environmental Evaluations Group and the National Academy of Sciences are consistent with the phased approach to planning and testing being undertaken by DOE. As shown in the current decision plan, these groups and others are reviewing the plans for testing and for demonstrating waste retrieval. These reviews are a major factor in the WIPP decision process.

The Panel has been asked to continue to assist the Department by reviewing implementation of their recommendations and progress in resolving WIPP issues.. The Panel will be providing comments on Department plans to validate the certification of Rocky Flats Plant transuranic and transuranic/mixed waste during November.