

First underground nuclear waste store set to open in US

[WASHINGTON] The US Department of Energy is on the brink of delivering its first consignment of radioactive waste to permanent storage. This follows certification by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) near Carlsbad, New Mexico, is ready to receive it.

Unless environmentalists succeed in two last-ditch legal challenges, the first shipment of low-level transuranic waste will arrive at WIPP from the Los Alamos National Laboratory on or soon after 19 June. The waste is clothing and equipment that has been contaminated by plutonium or other actinides in the US nuclear weapons complex, and which is now stored in steel barrels at 23 locations.

Although the waste is far less radioactive than the spent nuclear fuel and other highly radioactive waste that the United States hopes eventually to store at Yucca Mountain, Nevada, the certification of WIPP was described by Federico Peña, the energy secretary, as a "historic milestone".

The opening of WIPP, in a salt bed 2,000 feet underground, would mark the first time the United States has buried any nuclear waste in a repository that is supposed to be permanent — and the first time in the world that such waste has been deposited deep underground. Sweden and Finland have permanent repositories, but these are close to the land surface.

Warren Weart of the Sandia National Laboratory, New Mexico, a senior manager on the WIPP project for 25 years, said last week that he is not taking a successful operation for granted. "I'll hold off on a final celebration until we actually place some waste," he says. "I will be surprised if [opponents] don't try to block it or slow it down."

Don Hancock, director of the Southwest Research and Information Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, says that two lawsuits attempting to block the opening are pending — one against the EPA and one against the Department of Energy. They may attract the support of Tom Udall, the attorney-general of New Mexico. In contrast to Yucca Mountain, WIPP is supported by the governor and both senators in its home state.

Although not very radioactive — a tonne of it contains less than one-tenth of a curie — the transuranic waste contains elements such as plutonium which have long half-lives. So the argument about WIPP has focused on its ability to maintain its integrity for thousands of years. In 1996, a National Academy of Sciences panel concluded that it could do so if undisturbed by humans — but that a lack of disturbance, by oil drilling for example, could not be guaranteed. **C.M.**

Clinton 'is failing to honour pledge on AIDS vaccine'

[WASHINGTON] President Bill Clinton has failed to do enough to accelerate AIDS vaccine development, a year after pledging to develop an AIDS vaccine within a decade, according to US vaccine research advocates.

A critical report issued last week by the AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition (AVAC), a pressure group based in San Francisco, complains that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has failed to appoint a director for the new vaccine research centre that Clinton set up to lead the effort (see *Nature* 387, 323; 1997). It also says that the president has done nothing in the interim to follow through on his pledge. "A few inspiring speeches do not constitute leadership," the group says.

Some of AVAC's criticisms are echoed by the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, an operation supported by the World Bank and the United Nations AIDS programme. "We believe the president can do more," says Seth Berkley, president of the initiative, who says the ten-year goal will be met only if current efforts are accelerated.

AVAC says that NIH has faced a struggle in hiring a director for its new vaccine research centre because the individual appointed would have no autonomous budget, and would lack a well-defined place in the NIH management hierarchy.

Anne Thomas, a spokeswoman for NIH, says that the appointment is subject to "considerations that are as important as speed",

adding that "the search is active and we hope to have someone on campus this year". Of the general criticism, she says: "We think the work is progressing well in the vaccine programme, both intramural and extramural."

AVAC also says that corporations are not doing enough vaccine research. It singles out the pharmaceutical company Smith-Kline Beecham which, it says, has \$1.2 billion in annual vaccine revenues but "essentially no active HIV-vaccine development programme".

But the group does applaud the speed with which the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases issued 58 new "innovation grants" for vaccine research last year, and says the share of AIDS research funding spent on vaccines at NIH has grown from 6.7 per cent in 1995 to 9.5 per cent this year.

The comments of the two groups reflect long-standing concerns on the part of some physicians and AIDS activists that an unbridgeable gap still divides basic research from the trial and development of an AIDS vaccine. Many researchers, however, consider this gap less of a problem than the dearth of promising vaccine candidates for trial.

Scott Hitt, a Los Angeles physician who chairs the President's Advisory Committee on HIV/AIDS, says: "The president has stated a very ambitious goal. Until the vaccine is out, there will always be criticism that we're not doing enough." **Colin Macilwain**

Japan's emissions bill comes under fire

[TOKYO] Proposed Japanese legislation to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions has come under criticism for lacking measures necessary to ensure compliance by industry.

The bill, drawn up by the Environment Agency and now under consideration in parliament, provides a basic framework for Japan's emissions cuts. It is thought to be the first of its kind to be submitted by one of the signatory nations to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change after last December's meeting in Kyoto.

The bill would require both the central and prefectural governments to draw up plans to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, and to make frequent reports on their progress. It does not, however, require industry — the largest emitter of greenhouse gases — either to disclose emission levels or to draw up plans for effective reduction of such gases.

Hiroshi Oki, Japan's environment minister and chairman of the Kyoto conference, said in a statement last week that the proposed legislation "cannot be

rated 100 per cent". But it nevertheless "contains measures which are realistic at present", he said.

Environment agency officials insist that the significance of the bill lies in its suggestion that companies should adopt 'self-regulatory measures'. But critics such as members of the Kiko Forum, a federation of environmental groups, argue that Japan is unlikely to achieve its target — a six per cent cut from 1990 levels — by relying on industry's goodwill.

The preliminary draft of the bill, which would have imposed stricter measures on industry including mandatory reporting of plans for reduction of emissions, was heavily revised after it met resistance from the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) and industrial lobbyists. MITI says energy conservation legislation already provides measures for emissions reduction. But the energy-reduction bill does not specify measures to be taken on greenhouse gases, and does not apply to all of Japan's industry. **Asako Saegusa**