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Immediate Release

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## **Environment Secretary Ron Curry Secures Federal Funding for Improved WIPP Oversight; NMED to Add Seven to Carlsbad Staff**

(Santa Fe, NM) — New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) Secretary Ron Curry today announced that the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) had approved his request for \$600,000 in federal funds to reopen the Department's DOE Oversight Bureau office in Carlsbad. Due to federal funding cuts, this office was closed in 1996.

"With these funds NMED will be able to increase its presence in Carlsbad and improve oversight of the WIPP facility," said Secretary Curry. "These seven NMED employees will do vital work, looking over WIPP's shoulder and making sure that this operation is run safely and properly."

Personnel to be hired by NMED include one office manager, five technical staff and an administrative assistant. Veterans of the recently closed Environmental Evaluation Group (EEG) office are encouraged to apply. NMED hopes to have this office open by late summer.

"This office will pick up where EEG left off," Governor Bill Richardson said. "It is imperative for the state to provide proper oversight at WIPP. I would also like to commend Senator Jeff Bingaman for his leadership on this issue."

NMED's DOE Oversight Bureau (DOE OB) currently operates at Los Alamos and Sandia National Laboratories. At these sites, these Department personnel engage in non-regulatory oversight and scientific studies of environmental and worker safety issues. At Los Alamos, work has included groundbreaking studies of contaminants like perchlorate, PCBs and plutonium runoff since the Cerro Grande fire. The DOE OB is funded through an Agreement in Principle (AIP) with DOE. Staff at WIPP will work on similar issues and operate under the same agreement.

The regulatory role of NMED's Hazardous Waste Bureau in permitting and enforcement issues at WIPP will remain unchanged.

In his June 16 letter to Secretary Curry announcing the funding approval, WIPP's Acting Manager R. Paul Detwiler wrote: "DOE believes that the proposed oversight office for the WIPP program would be a constructive addition to the existing AIP... It is a timely innovation that should improve the

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relationship between DOE and the State of New Mexico by providing oversight and monitoring of the now fully operational WIPP repository.”

NMED is currently accepting comments and suggestions on what should be included in this office's scope of work. These should be addressed to Charles Lundstrom, NMED's Water and Waste Management Division Director.

For further information contact Jon Goldstein, Communications Director, NMED at (505) 827-0314.

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