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WIPP UPDATE: November 4, 2016

Rock Fall Confirmed in Panel 7, Room 4

A team consisting of geotechnical staff, radiological control personnel, members of the mine rescue team and a representative from the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) re-entered the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) underground earlier today to determine the location and extent of a rock fall (See Nov. 3 WIPP Update) that was believed to have occurred late yesterday in Panel 7.

Results of the investigation concluded that a rock fall took place in Room 4 of Panel 7. The team reported that salt rock debris visible on the floor of the room suggested that a significant portion of the ceiling or "back" in the 300 ft. by 33 ft. disposal room had fallen, but the fall was limited to Room 4.

The roof fall in Room 4 was expected, as ongoing geotechnical monitoring results for Room 4 had identified accelerated convergence rates (salt movement) over the past several months, and WIPP geotechnical engineers had already prohibited entry into the room due to personnel safety concerns.

Although portions of Panel 7 remain contaminated as a result of the February 2014 radiological release, there were no indications of a release of radioactive contamination associated with the rock fall.

"Safety of the workers is and will always be our highest priority," said Phil Breidenbach, Nuclear Waste Partnership President and Project Manager. "The fact that the rock fall occurred in a prohibited area where people are not allowed is evidence that our program is working to protect the workers."

The Department of Energy and Nuclear Waste Partnership will be working with MSHA to develop a plan and path forward to address ground control issues in Panel 7. After nearly three years of reduced ground control, areas in the WIPP underground are showing signs of increased salt creep that naturally occurs over time. This salt creep is what will eventually seal the transuranic waste and was an important characteristic in the selection of the location for the WIPP repository.

For more information on the WIPP ground control program, please see the October 13 Town Hall Meeting.