

So what does Sandia do now?

By John German

Although WIPP's opening represents a victorious splash in a 25-year game of tug-of-war between politics and science, Sandia has much more left to do in Carlsbad than simply close up shop. Sandians will continue to test WIPP seals and plugs and monitor closure of rooms as the salt formation slowly envelops the waste.

Already Sandia has begun preparing for WIPP's five-year recertification that requires DOE to again demonstrate that the repository will continue to comply with regulations at least 10,000 years into the future. In addition to compliance, the first recertification will focus on cost and safety efficiencies as the plant's operations evolve.

As DOE strives to clean up as much of its legacy waste as possible by the year 2006, Sandia will continue to support DOE's National Transuranic Waste Program (NTP), headquartered in Carlsbad since 1994. The NTP helps coordinate waste characterization, validation, transport, logistics, planning, predictive modeling, and nuclear waste management operations among DOE waste generator sites across the country.

Sandia's WIPP experience also forms the basis of what Sandians in Carlsbad hope will grow into an international center of excellence for nuclear waste management. The center would transfer lessons learned to DOE's proposed repositories at Yucca Mountain (for civilian spent fuel and high-level defense wastes) and at the Nevada Test Site (for special-case wastes).

Observers from seven foreign countries interested in incorporating WIPP lessons-learned into their own repository projects have visited the site and continue to interact with Sandians. Of particular interest are predictive Performance Assessment (PA) models that proved so effective in demonstrating WIPP's regulatory compliance.

"The WIPP experience has put this team ahead of any other program nationally and internationally," says Ned Elkins, Manager for Carlsbad Operations Dept. 6810.

Sandia is working with the Carlsbad Department of Development to create new jobs and technology "spinoffs" in the community and in southeastern New Mexico. Sandians are working with the City to develop plans for creation of a Carlsbad technology park that would attract and encourage technology-related business.

And as always, Sandians continue to work closely with the public schools in southeastern New Mexico with the goal of encouraging young people to pursue careers in science and technology.