

waste packages. The DOE also plans to expand the physical space of the repository by excavating new disposal rooms, called panels.

The GAO, however, found that the DOE may run out of room to meet future TRU waste disposal needs at WIPP if significant volumes of waste are added to DOE's inventory or if the permit modification authorizing the revised volume

counting method is successfully challenged in court. Most notably, the GAO notes that the National Nuclear Security Administration's plan to produce around 80 plutonium pits per year by 2030 could generate 566 cubic meters of additional TRU waste a year for up to 50 years.

DOE officials informed the GAO that in addition to the TRU waste generated through plutonium pit

production, other waste streams are currently under consideration for disposal at WIPP but are not yet part of DOE's TRU waste inventory because they do not meet the criteria for inclusion.

The GAO also found that the DOE does not have assurance that WIPP's planned additional physical space will be constructed before the existing space is full, which would result in a potential interruption to disposal operations.

In addition to the space constraints, the GAO report found that WIPP may not have sufficient staff to address challenges in completing key ventilation projects needed to return the site to full waste disposal operations following the accidental release of radiological contamination in 2014. Currently, the DOE is undertaking two capital asset projects to increase ventilation to the underground—the installation of the Safety Significant Confinement Ventilation System and the construction of a new utility shaft. According to the GAO, the DOE is facing challenges in identifying contractors who are qualified to execute these two projects, as well as in obtaining the necessary regulatory approvals to complete them.

In its report, the GAO recommended that the DOE identify and analyze options to address staffing vacancies, update its schedule for adding physical space at WIPP, and develop a plan for mitigating the impacts that an interruption to WIPP's waste disposal operations would have on the DOE's TRU cleanup program. The DOE agreed with all three recommendations.



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### CONTACT US:

George Vaughan, Vice President of Business Development  
T: 770.447.1144 | gvaughan@nacintl.com