

With long-term slippage in the projected opening of a permanent site, the Department viewed the MRS site as a way to fulfill legal requirements under the act to begin accepting spent reactor fuel from nuclear utilities by 1998. The Department also believed that selection of an MRS site would show progress in solving the waste management problem and therefore serve as a possible basis for the start of new nuclear power plant orders. The problem with MRS siting, however, was the same as with the permanent site: finding a willing host. The Nuclear Waste Policy Act created the position of nuclear waste negotiator to identify a state or Indian tribe amenable to hosting a MRS facility. As of February 1992, seven entities had applied to the Department for grants to study the feasibility of a MRS siting.¹⁸¹

The Department spent \$700 million and seven years constructing the WIPP facility at a site located about twenty-five miles east of Carlsbad, New Mexico. Designed as a permanent disposal facility for 800,000 barrels of transuranic defense wastes, including contaminated clothing, plutonium fabrication hardware, and wastewater treatment sludge, WIPP was scheduled to begin receiving waste shipments in fall 1988. Safety and environmental concerns, however, delayed the opening. In October 1989, Watkins unveiled a restructured program for WIPP. The Department now anticipated placing experimental amounts of waste in WIPP by mid-1990. Delays, nonetheless, continued, and the Department pushed back the scheduled opening. In January 1991, the Department obtained from the Department of Interior an administrative land withdrawal giving the Department full control of the WIPP site. Congressional complaints prompted Interior to suspend the withdrawal, thus providing Congress the opportunity to develop its own withdrawal. As Congress debated, and as New Mexico officials attempted to gain more safeguards and benefits for the State, Watkins grew increasingly impatient. In early October, he announced that WIPP was ready to commence its experimental phase, and he again

sought an administrative withdrawal of the land. The State of New Mexico filed suit, requesting an injunction against proceeding with the experimental phase, and in late January 1992 a Federal judge ruled that a congressionally approved land withdrawal was necessary. The Department appealed the decision. After further legislative and judicial wrangling, Congress passed and, on October 30, 1992, President Bush signed the WIPP Land Withdrawal Act.¹⁸²

MAKING OF THE NATIONAL ENERGY STRATEGY

Section 801 of the Department of Energy Organization Act required the President to submit his biennial national energy policy plan to Congress by April 1, 1989. Like its predecessor, the Bush Administration stressed that the Nation's energy security relied on a mixture of energy sources, including coal, nuclear power, oil and natural gas, alternative fuels, renewables, and conservation. But, as Admiral Watkins complained, there seemed to be "no common thread" permitting conversion to an action plan, "no integrated link" leading to a strategy to bring programs and policies to fruition over time. Seeking a new approach and hoping to build a national consensus, the new administration did not meet the April 1 deadline for submitting the national energy policy plan. Watkins, nonetheless, affirmed the Department's intent to develop a sound national energy policy, coupled with an integrated strategy to carry out that policy. "I think you will agree that the time has come to turn the frequently divisive fifteen-year-old energy debate into a sensible plan of action," he told the Western Governors Association. "In the past the Department of Energy has not assumed a national leadership role in this effort—on my watch it will."¹⁸³

On July 26, President Bush, accompanied by Watkins, announced that the Department was developing a comprehensive National Energy Strategy. "We cannot and will not wait," the President declared, "for the next energy crisis to force us to respond." He said that