

WIPP Mine Rescue Team Takes High Honors at National Competition

Carlsbad, N.M., August 29 -- The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant's (WIPP) Silver Mine Rescue Team took a strong fourth place finish in the 36-team field that competed in the two-day 1996 National Mine Rescue Competition, last week in Las Vegas, Nevada.

"This high level of performance exemplifies the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and Westinghouse's emphasis on safety at the WIPP," said George Dials, manager of the DOE's Carlsbad Area Office, which administers the WIPP and National Transuranic Programs. "We are very pleased with the level at which our mine rescue teams compete. It is consistent with our commitment to excellence in all environmental, safety and health areas at the WIPP."

Individual honors went to Fred Miller of the WIPP's Silver Team who won second place in the benchman's competition. The benchman competition tests the skills required to maintain and repair self-contained breathing apparatus used by team members in areas where air is not breathable. OCI Wyoming L. P. Big Island Mine and Refinery's White Team outscored the field to win the National Championship in the team competition. Mississippi Potash Inc., of Carlsbad, placed fifth.

Since their inception in 1985, WIPP's mine rescue teams have claimed 102 team trophies, including the best scores in 41 competitions. They have also won the previous three national contests (1990, 1992, 1994) for non-producing mines. Because of Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) rules, 1994 was the first year the WIPP's Silver and Blue mine rescue teams became eligible to win the overall national championship. The WIPP's Blue team, the defending national champs, took fourteenth overall in this year's competition.

To keep skills current and at top efficiency, mine rescue teams compete in mock disasters arranged for and judged by MSHA officials. Each team member is proficient in mine gas detection, ventilation, first aid, mine recovery and firefighting. In a real emergency, their lives and the lives of co-workers would depend on the proficiency of the teams' skills.

Team members voluntarily participate in mine rescue competitions and conduct most of their mine rescue training on their own time. All members hold full-time jobs within the Westinghouse Electric Corporation Waste Isolation Division, the DOE's management and operating contractor at the WIPP.

"Because Westinghouse and the DOE place the highest priority on worker safety, we want to recognize these teams of mine rescue personnel," said Jayne Davis, Westinghouse manager of industrial safety and emergency management, who oversees the WIPP mine rescue teams.

Members of the WIPP Silver Team include Billy Beeman, Robert Rhodes, Ronnie Rhodes, Fred Miller, Mike Procter, Edger Keyser, Jeff Knox, and Beverly Watson. Buddy Webb is the training coordinator for both teams.

The WIPP is designed to permanently dispose of transuranic radioactive waste generated by defense-related activities. Located in southeastern New Mexico, 26 miles east of Carlsbad, project facilities include disposal rooms excavated in an ancient, stable salt formation 2,150 feet (almost half a mile) underground. Transuranic waste consists primarily of clothing, tools, rags, and other disposable items contaminated with trace amounts of radioactive elements, mostly plutonium.