

Press Advisory 1/18/02; embargoed until Monday 1/21/02 at 4:30 pm
Press conference and public meeting Monday, 4:30 pm in the State Capitol Rotunda

NM Environment Department Plan Postpones Lab Cleanup Indefinitely

**NMED rebuffs request for public hearing from watchdog groups, claims
formal public comment not required on billion-dollar “cleanup;”
Bush Administration gearing up to cut future cleanup funds next month**

**New nuclear waste disposed on site to dwarf waste “cleaned up” in decades ahead, as
unpermitted landfill continues to operate and nuke programs grow; 27 NM environmental
groups urge closure of landfill; NMED silent on nuke dump issue**

Contact: Lydia Clark or Greg Mello, 505-982-7747

SANTA FE – The Study Group will host an informational press conference and public meeting in the State Capitol Rotunda on Martin Luther King Day, Monday, January 21, at 4:30 pm regarding the status of continued nuclear waste disposal and cleanup at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). Maps of contaminated sites, areal photos, and other information will be available.

The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) has issued its latest revision of its plan for cleaning up more than 1,000 contaminated sites at LANL under state and federal hazardous waste laws, and Monday is the last day offered by the NMED for public comment.

Unfortunately, this “plan,” like the ones that preceded it, contains no cleanup standards, virtually no cleanup schedules, no maps of the site, no indication of what contaminants are present and in what quantities, and perhaps above all it offers no end to the continued large-scale disposal of further nuclear waste at Los Alamos.

It does, however, offer a schedule for reports, as it has largely done for the past 10 years. This approach will ensure that scarce federal funds will continue to be exhausted on lab overhead, speculative investigations of little or no practical import, and paper studies. Requests for reports are, for all practical purposes, almost unenforceable, since it is impossible for third parties (like judges) to objectively gauge the quality of a given report.

So far, between \$550 million and \$750 million has been spent on the “cleanup,” with only minor progress to show. Total costs are expected to easily exceed \$1 billion, but since no cleanup goals or standards have been formulated, final budget figures are meaningless. Management reforms, such as clear goals and competitive bidding, are necessary to use available funds efficiently. In early February the Bush Administration is expected to announce significant cuts in cleanup funds nationwide. Therefore there is every reason to expect that Los Alamos, with which New Mexico has no binding agreements requiring cleanup, may experience significant cleanup funding cuts in the coming years. Plans which postpone cleanup far into the future may be not funded at all. The NMED plan does not just defer cleanup, however: it

provides no mandate for cleanup, period.

In this, the NMED plans appears to facilitate Department of Energy (DOE) and LANL plans, under which many or even most sites are to be left essentially “as-is.” What little cleanup is being done is on a “voluntary” basis, i.e. with little or no formal oversight.

As was the case for predecessor “cleanup plans,” there will apparently be no public hearing. NMED has in fact never held a public hearing on its proposed remedies for Los Alamos, which has some 26 chemical and nuclear landfills. These landfills contain more than 18 million cubic feet of waste.

Eight environmental organizations petitioned NMED Secretary Maggiore for a hearing in November; their request was rebuffed by him on December 12.

The opportunity for public comment on the current “plan” was provided by NMED in a cryptic one-page letter sent out just before the Christmas holidays, but recipients were warned that, in NMED’s view at least, there was no actual requirement on the part of the agency to take public comment into account. That informal comment period ends on Monday.

The sketchy “plan,” available at <http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/hwb/pubnotice.html> or in the office of the NMED Hazardous Waste Bureau, turns out to be incomprehensible to all but specialists in this particular process, effectively precluding informed public comment.

Perhaps the most serious omission in NMED’s current plan is any requirement for final closure for LANL’s “Area G” nuclear waste landfill. In a report issued in 2000, DOE estimated that some 37,000 cubic meters of waste would be generated in the LANL “cleanup” program over the next 70 years, all of which would be re-buried on-site at “Area G.” **Meanwhile some 520,000 cubic meters of newly-generated radioactive waste (i.e. about 36,000 55-gallon drums’ worth annually) would also be added to “Area G” – fourteen times as much as was “cleaned up” from other parts of the lab, for several decades to come. Under current “cleanup” plans, then, LANL gets a lot “dirtier,” not “cleaner.”**

“After years of questionable technical and regulatory decisions, made in close collaboration by LANL and NMED officials with no formal input from the public, the situation has become absurd,” said Study Group Director Greg Mello. “We think the first step needed is to have a formal public hearing so that the basic facts regarding the situation can be understood and placed on the record. This does not seem like too great a request. Concurrently, we should stop adding to the burden of uncontained nuclear and chemical waste already held by the Pajarito Plateau. This, many of us strongly believe, has long been required by law in the case of Area G in particular.

“One of the next steps would be for all of us question some of the programs that are expected to generate all this waste. Realistically, this won’t happen as long as there is an open hole in the ground where the waste can be put. Los Alamos has become a haven for “dirty” programs that no one else will accept, just as laboratory managers told us years ago it would. Are some of these programs really needed? Many knowledgeable observers doubt it.

“And we need, at long last, to discuss environmentally-sound remedies, both for the waste we have and the waste we truly and inevitably must generate, as contaminated buildings are torn down and the site prepared for future generations, who will inherit what we leave here.”

“It’s fitting that we discuss these matters on Martin Luther King Day,” Mello added. The weapons of mass destruction that are promoted, designed, tested, and built here also do violence to the land. Both are linked to our acceptance of violence in our society and to our inability to pay for the opportunities our children deserve. In today’s dollars, we’ve spent over \$47 billion at Los Alamos. What kind of economic and social development – what kind of real security – do we have to show for it? We are now spending more on nuclear weapons at Los

Alamos than we've ever spent before – annually, it's roughly about 30 times what we spend on cleanup. To quote Dr. King, these priorities suggest our nation is 'approaching spiritual death.' We can change this situation. All we have to do is to ask, clearly for once, for something better.”

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