



Los Alamos Study Group

Nuclear Disarmament • Environmental Protection • Social Justice • Economic Sustainability

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DOE Proposes to Bring 1,000 Drums of Transuranic Waste to Los Alamos No Other Options To Be Studied, DOE Silent on Final Disposition

Contact: Greg Mello, 982-7747

LOS ALAMOS--The Department of Energy (DOE) is proposing this week to bring some 21,000 "sealed sources" of radiation, comprising approximately 30,000 curies of transuranic (TRU) waste, to Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) for indefinite storage--and, quite possibly, on-site disposal. In a letter and "Supplement Analysis" dated August 22, David Gurule of DOE's Los Alamos office states that no further environmental or safety analysis is necessary before bringing the waste to LANL.

According to DOE, these wastes consist "primarily" of plutonium-238, plutonium-239, and americium-241, associated with other materials like beryllium, a chemical toxin and listed hazardous waste. No further information about the quantities of radioisotopes and hazardous constituents has been provided.

Some of the wastes are defense-related--the smaller part, it is believed--and this portion will be earmarked for possible disposal at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) near Carlsbad.

For the rest of the waste, there is no storage, processing, or disposal plan, other than storage at LANL for an indefinite period. In lieu of a plan today, DOE proposes to analyze disposition options for this waste in about six years.

In fact, no specific environmental study of the hazard of storing this waste at LANL has ever been done, let alone any analysis of alternatives. DOE's only analysis to date of long-term waste storage, the 1999 LANL Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement (SWEIS), was a generic analysis which did not address the storage of these wastes.

Much of this waste is to be stored at LANL in an old building, the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research (CMR) building, located directly over an active earthquake fault. LANL's calculations suggest that this building would collapse in the event of a modest-sized earthquake. Seismic-induced ground rupture at this location is also a hazard.

What is not stored at the CMR Building would be stored at LANL's main waste storage and disposal site, TA-54, which is vulnerable to fire (as noted in the SWEIS--and recent experience), to terrorist attack, and to theft.

TA-54 already contains more than 10 million cubic feet of radioactive and chemical waste in disposal cells below the surface, and roughly 60,000 drums' worth of waste is stored above the ground.

This week's proposal is the first time that commercial nuclear waste, some of it

originating in the civilian nuclear power industry, has been proposed for long-term storage and (although this possibility is not explicitly stated) possible disposal at this site. Because of their long-lived and highly-dangerous nature, there is no disposal site in the United States licensed by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to receive these "greater than Class C" nuclear wastes, and none are proposed to be so licensed.

This week's proposal is also the first time that large quantities of prospective WIPP waste are to be shipped first to Los Alamos for consolidation and long-term storage.

Gurule's letter says that DOE will not officially declare this material "waste" until some time in the future. In this way, DOE and LANL apparently hope to at least temporarily evade NRC licensing requirements, as well as the hazardous waste permitting requirements of the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA).

It is doubtful whether the CMR Building could meet RCRA storage requirements, given its seismic hazard. The CMR Building could not, in fact, even be built in its present location and handle nuclear materials under current DOE orders.

These wastes would be transported to Los Alamos in approximately 1,000 shielded metal drums. TRUPACT containers would not be used.

Background

The waste in question is comprised of nuclear sources which are typically sealed in multiple stainless steel jackets, and which have been in use in a variety of industries, universities, and government laboratories. Tens of thousands of radiation sources, of many types, were placed into private hands beginning in the 1950s; the sealed sources mentioned in this week's announcement are a subset of this larger universe.

Some of these sources definitely comprise a hazard to public and worker safety in their present location. Further, plutonium from these and other sources could be combined to manufacture nuclear weapons or, along with other isotopes like americium, nuclear terrorist devices.

DOE and LANL have had a rather slow-paced, low-priority program in place to collect and chemically separate these waste sources since 1979. Only 1,100 sources have been collected at LANL so far. LANL received a transfusion of money in 1995 to continue and expand this work, but this expansion apparently has not happened. It seems that the separation work, as low-key as it has been, competes for space with other programs deemed more important, such as the manufacture of plutonium "pits" for nuclear weapons.

Further, DOE and LANL fear commingling defense and non-defense waste subsequent to processing, which raises legal questions regarding prospective waste disposal at the WIPP site, which is authorized to receive only military-related transuranic waste. This is important because the manufacture of plutonium pits and other related work at Los Alamos continue to create large volumes of transuranic waste, volumes that could increase if manufacturing activities ramp up in coming years, despite local opposition.

This week's announcement discontinues the chemical separation policy, in which the separated plutonium was added to the nation's surplus.

DOE has several alternatives to the proposed action. These include: 1) collecting and processing these wastes at Los Alamos as originally planned, funded, and begun, which would probably simplify final disposition; 2) consolidating and storing these materials at its current staging locations--which are licensed by the NRC and run by private contractor(s)--until something better than another "interim" plan is available; or 3)

collecting and storing the civilian portion of the sealed sources at a much more secure storage site, such as the large Manzano Nuclear Weapons Storage Area, which is now unused and which could store, and more safely protect, not just these sources, but tens of tons of plutonium.

There is in any case no compelling reason to bring commercial nuclear waste to LANL other than processing--unless, of course, on-site disposal were envisioned.

There has been no environmental, cost, and proliferation analysis of alternatives such as these, and none is planned. DOE's proposed action regarding these sealed sources, like so many actions proposed by the agency, seems to be an "interim" step in what often seems like an endless shell game, moving waste from site to site, serving what are often unstated, and at best highly-uncertain, goals.

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