Los Alamos Study Group

Nuclear Disarmament • Environmental Protection • Social Justice • Economic Sustainability

Sustained Disapproval

Portions of the print media record of the public debate about nuclear waste disposal at Los Alamos National Laboratory 1992 - 2006

January 27, 2006

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RIO GRANDE SIERRAN

NEWS OF THE RIO GRANDE CHAPTER
SIERRA CLUB • NOV./DEC. 1992

Los Alamos' War on the Environment

DOE Contemplating New Plutonium Role for Lab

by Greg Mello

Mesita del Buey is a smallish mesa of the Pajarito Plateau, bounded by the intermittent stream of Pajarito Canyon on the south and by Canada del Buey on the north. Near its southeastern edge lies a large Pueblo ruin called Tshirege. The Pajarito stream supplied water for the people who lived here, and water can still be found in the cattail marsh just upstream from the ruin.

Tshirege lies behind a Department of Energy (DOE) fence. Just to the west is an active radioactive waste landfill, one of the largest in the nation, made up of pits typically 600 feet long that are shoehorned into every available spot on the mesa. In the soulless argot of Los Alamos National Laboratory, this place is called "Area G." Into these pits, and the shafts that lie between them, an estimated 7 million cubic feet of radioactive waste have been dumped. Perhaps another 5 million cubic feet of radwaste lie in other LANL disposal sites.

Transuranic wastes were irretrievably dumped at Area G until 1971; since then most (but not all) of the plutonium-bearing waste has been stored in drums buried retrievably in the tuff, or in tentlike temporary buildings. In a recent random inspection of 100 out of about 16,000 plutonium-containing drums, several were found to have been perforated by corrosion.

Mixed fission products from Los Alamos reactors (aka high-level waste), mixed activation products, tritium-bearing wastes, even entire buildings—all are buried at Area G. *And radioactive waste is still being buried,* at a rate of roughly 180,000 cubic feet per year.

While a 20-year, $2 billion investigation probes 2200 other potentially-contaminated sites in Los Alamos, the trucks still roll to Mesita del Buey. In all likelihood, any radioactive soil cleaned up from these other sites will simply be re-interred at Area G.

(Continued on page 5)

Los Alamos

(continued from front page)

As of this writing, the New Mexico Environment Department is preparing a significant enforcement action against LANL for violations of the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act. LANL has been in chronic violation of the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act as well. Some 149 sources lack monitoring for radioactive air emissions, and LANL's known liquid waste outfalls, also some 150 or so in number, are now operating without a permit.

The Lab typically operates within a regulatory labyrinth; the complexity and sheer magnitude of environmental issues at LANL severely taxes the resources of state and federal regulators. And the state has always been reluctant to apply environmental laws at face value to facilities as large as LANL.

Most of the plutonium waste entering Area G originates a couple of miles to the west at Technical Area 55, at what used to be called—in a less PR-conscious time—the Plutonium Processing Facility. TA-55 is now the best place to process plutonium anywhere in the nuclear weapons complex, and has produced enough plutonium for 300 or more nuclear weapons in a year. Linked to this plant by an underground tunnel is a plutonium storage facility with a capacity of 60 tons, by far the largest such storage site in the nation.

These and other facilities, a compliant citizenry, a uniformly supportive congressional delegation, and 43 square miles of mesas and canyons (a portion of which was originally seized from San Ildefonso Pueblo), all make Los Alamos an ideal location for the processing of plutonium and the manufacturing of small numbers of warheads, as some have proposed.

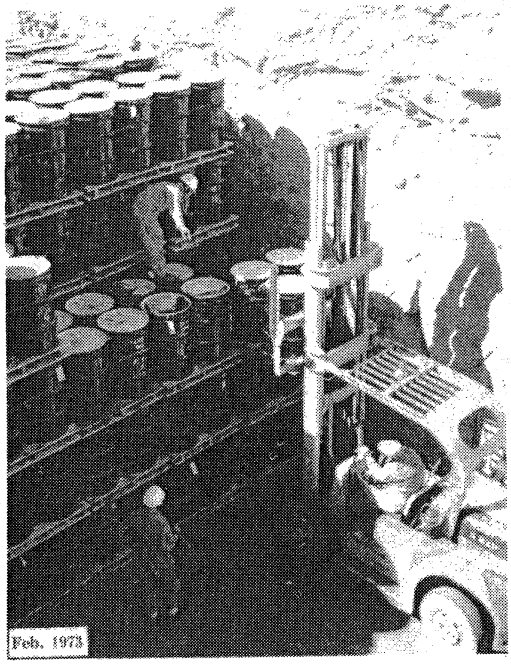
To the press, the Lab is negative about these proposals, but a "can-do" attitude is apparent in planning documents. And, while the public affairs office tells the newspapers that the Lab does not want to process plutonium or make weapons, some LANL managers are lobbying in Washington to do just that.

But wait—isn't the cold War over? Isn't the Lab now devoting itself to environmental cleanup, new civilian technologies, and the safe dismantlement of warheads? Not quite yet. LANL has been lobbying hard for the continued development and testing of new nuclear warheads, and as a result the warhead development budget went up 16 percent this past fiscal year. Most of the increase—about $110 million—was taken from the DOE's proposed environmental cleanup funds by Senator Domenici. And the nuclear weapons research and development budget will rise again 3 percent for FY1993.

One current emphasis at LANL is "mininukes," designed to be "effective but not abhorrent" weapons for attacking Third World targets and projecting U.S. power more effectively around the world. Another, larger thrust is for "safer" nuclear weapons, which even some top-level DOE and DOD officials have said is unnecessary. The main idea, apparently, is simply to keep busy—no matter what the cost in dollars, in the international cooperation we need to fight nuclear proliferation, or in the waste streams that are still polluting the Pajarito Plateau.

The Lab's chilling quest for perfectly reliable and "safe" nuclear weapons does not comport with the bulldozers above Tshirege. The waste that is feared for WIPP is already there, in unlined trenches and thousands of plain steel drums—many of which are buried and cannot be inspected—at a waste site that is not more than one hundred yards from surface water.

One of the Old Ones drew a great plumed serpent on the side of the mesa at Tshirege, in praise and invitation to the ever-creative and regenerative power of nature and humankind. Now, nearby, bronze markers warn future generations away, fluttering survey tape keeps workers away from localized "hot spots," and all trees must be removed because their roots can convey radionuclides to the biosphere.



Handling of sludge drums during disposal at Los Alamos Lab, circa 1973. Photo courtesy of LASG.

Sierra Club Joins in Calling for Hearing on Lab Future

The Eight Northern Pueblos Council joined in September with 18 environmental and community organizations—including the Rio Grande Chapter of the Sierra Club—in an appeal to the Regents of the University of California to come to New Mexico and hear our concerns. These groups called for a public hearing and a new sitewide EIS for all proposed LANL activities. The groups also expressed alarm that the University, which runs the Lab, seeks complete release from all environmental and safety liability in its new contract with DOE.

What You Can Do

- Call or write Judy Espinosa, Secretary of the Environment Department, and urge her to approve decisive enforcement action, with significant fines.
- Call or write your Senators and Congressman; tell them that we do not want to host a new plutonium processing or production mission at LANL. LANL's most appropriate and beneficial role is to reverse the arms race and clean up its mess, not to design new weapons or prepare plutonium for re-use.
- Drop us a postcard or call if you are interested in more information, want to be on our mailing list, or can help in any way.

[Greg Mello is an environmental engineer who works for the Los Alamos Study Group, an nonprofit organization devoted to converting Los Alamos National Laboratory to peacetime missions. He led the first state RCRA inspection team to LANL in 1984. Greg and his colleagues at LASG can be reached at 240 Griffin St., Santa Fe, NM 87501, telephone 505-982-8315.]

SANTA FE

THE NEW MEXICAN SATURDAY, OCTOBER 30, 1993 SECTION B

Lab's study for new landfill already attracting fire

By KATHLEENE PARKER
For The New Mexican

LOS ALAMOS — A proposal for a landfill at Los Alamos National Laboratory is under fire from environmentalists opposed to its location near Bandelier National Monument and from Los Alamos officials who are upset by the county's exclusion from the project.

A decision by LANL to build its own landfill would mean the county would have to build another landfill for its use when the current joint landfill reaches capacity in several years, county officials said.

The proposed LANL landfill, at Technical Area 49, would be at the southern edge of the lab off of State Road 4, which forms the boundary between U.S. Department of Energy land and Bandelier National Monument. The landfill would not accept radioactive or hazardous materials, said project engineer Craig Bachmeier of LANL.

The lab has made no public announcement of the proposal, but an internal lab memo said the landfill will be only for LANL and DOE use because of "factors of cost, security and present and future liability for cleanup."

Santa Fe resident Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group, a lab watchdog organization, said his group is critical of the dump's proximity to Bandelier and believes there are technical problems with the site.

Bachmeier said that because the lab decision is still preliminary, such criticism is premature. It will be a year or more before the lab completes geological testing and makes a final decision, he said.

"To put it into perspective, DOE has not authorized any funding for this yet . . . We are at the very, very beginning," Bachmeier said.

Mello said that is the time to involve the public.

"The lab makes decisions in private and informs the public later," he said.

According to Bachmeier, the lab studied 33 sites on lab property. The TA 49 site appears to be best able to comply with state and federal laws, he said. The lab also wants to put the landfill where it will not be visible from residences, highways or Bandelier, and computer simulations indicate that the TA 49 site best meets that requirement, he said.

Mello said TA 49 is a poor choice because it is in a ravine. Runoff from rain and snow will flow into the ravine, causing erosion and potentially causing pollutants in the landfill to leach into underlying aquifers, he said.

"It is sort of like putting a dump in a riverbed," he said. "They are doing it to minimize cost because there is less digging, and to save mesa-top sites for expansion of lab facilities, especially weapons activities."

> **"To put it into perspective, DOE has not authorized any funding for this yet . . . We are at the very, very beginning."**
>
> **CRAIG BACHMEIER**
> Project engineer at LANL

Bachmeier said the landfill will be lined with nonpermeable soils and a man-made liner to prevent leaching into ground water.

Mello said there will be conflicts between the landfill and Bandelier National Monument, especially from increased traffic from dump trucks.

Please see **LANDFILL**, Page B-3

LANDFILL

Continued from Page B-1

Bachmeier said that about 12 dump trucks and a few smaller trucks will travel from the lab to the dump a day. All dump trucks will be covered to prevent blowing of wastes, he said.

Bandelier is cautiously supportive of the proposal.

"From Bandelier's perspective, it would be ideal if adjacent lab lands were managed as buffer zones, but maybe that isn't possible," said Brian Jacobs, a natural resource specialist at Bandelier.

Jacobs said he thinks lab officials are trying to be sensitive to the park, but he hopes park officials have a chance to take a long look at the proposal.

Los Alamos County officials already are making public their objections.

County officials realized that hazardous materials regulations would mean the lab and the county would have separate sections in a new landfill, said Byron Palmer of the Los Alamos County Solid Waste Management Board.

But the DOE decision to build its own landfill leaves the county in a lurch, he said.

The county has no suitable land for its own landfill and will be dependent upon DOE to provide a county dump site through a land swap, Palmer said.

Bachmeier said the lab and DOE will continue to work with the county.

"Due to funding reductions, there is just not money available for a facility that could serve both the county and the lab," he said.

He said liability for any future problems make it impractical for DOE to participate in a landfill with anyone.

"These are liability issues faced by any industrial organization, not just DOE. There is a responsibility for eternity for any environmental problems" that develop at landfills, he said.

County Council Chairman Jim Greenwood referred to recent incidents in which radioactive materials from the lab were sent to the county landfill accidentally and said he took issue with Bachmeier's position.

"I think if you ask the average person on the street if they are more concerned about what the laboratory or the county puts in the landfill, they will tell you the laboratory," he said. "I think maybe what we ought to be asking is if the county is willing to take the responsibility for what the lab puts in the landfill."

SANTA FE

THE NEW MEXICAN WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 1993 SECTION B

DOE approves waste site in Los Alamos

LANL can bury chemical, radioactive debris

By KEITH EASTHOUSE
The New Mexican

The Department of Energy has approved a Los Alamos National Laboratory proposal to place nuclear and chemical waste generated by future laboratory operations into a planned $22 million disposal facility.

The Mixed Waste Disposal Facility, which would be on 60 acres of laboratory property, originally was conceived as a repository for existing waste generated by past lab operations.

Paul Aamodt, deputy group leader of the lab's environmental restoration program, said that placing mixed waste — waste contaminated with both radioactive and chemical substances — into the facility has always been a possibility.

Aamodt said that waste from future operations stretching to 2018 — when the facility is expected to stop taking all waste — would be placed into the disposal site.

He and Steve Slaten of the DOE's Los Alamos office said the amount of waste generated by future operations would be minimal — less than 1 percent of the total of 475,000 cubic yards of mixed waste that is expected to be buried at the site.

But a lab critic said the DOE decision gives the laboratory the freedom to place larger amounts of mixed waste generated by future operations into the facility if it needs to.

Such larger amounts could be generated if the laboratory becomes involved in nuclear weapons production work, a possibility being considered by the DOE, said Mary Riseley of the Los Alamos Study Group — a Santa Fe citizens group created to monitor LANL.

Jay Coghlan of Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety agreed, saying that "the lab's real priority is to continue its waste-producing nuclear weapons programs."

Riseley also said that the DOE decision means that other DOE facilities could ship their mixed waste for disposal at Los Alamos.

Aamodt said "we have absolutely no intention, unless it is forced upon us, to accept waste other than from Los Alamos."

Aamodt said the bulk of the waste would come from the lab's environmental restoration project, a $2 billion effort to clean up and dispose of waste in and around the lab. That waste is the legacy of 50 years of laboratory operations.

The waste, which would be entombed in clay-lined underground shafts, would include contaminated soil and rubble, toxic solvents and other materials collected during the environmental restoration.

The estimated amount of waste is roughly double the amount of plutonium-contaminated defense waste that would be disposed of at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, the controversial underground nuclear repository near Carlsbad.

However, the waste that would be stored at the Mixed Waste Disposal Facility would be less radioactive than the waste that would go to WIPP, Aamodt said.

The LANL facility, which is still in the design stage, has a couple of hurdles it

Please see **WASTE**, Page B-4

WASTE

Continued from Page B-1

still must overcome.

The main one is that it must be approved by the New Mexico Environment Department, which has the authority to regulate mixed waste under the federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act.

Aamodt said the lab hopes to submit a permit application to the state next year. He said the lab wants to open the facility by 1998.

Lab officials also want the Environmental Protection Agency to allow the laboratory to bypass treating some of the waste — treatment is normally required by federal law — and place it directly into the ground.

Aamodt said that to receive such an exemption or "variance," the lab must persuade the EPA that the disposal facility will not allow any of the waste to escape into the surrounding environment.

He said that if the lab does not receive such permission, it will have to consider other options.

One would be to treat the waste. But Aamodt said that would be expensive, particularly if the waste is in the form of large amounts of contaminated soil.

Another alternative would be to ship the waste off-site. Laboratory officials visited a privately owned facility in Utah called Envirocare in May. Aamodt said that facility could take some of the waste that will be dug up by the environmental restoration program.

But he said that shipping the waste would be more expensive and could provoke opposition from citizen groups and from the cities that the waste would pass through.

Earlier this year, the DOE decided to allow the lab to do an "environmental assessment" of the project, rather than a more time-consuming "environmental impact statement," which would require public hearings.

This outcome was assisted by our coalition, internal contacts, a public demonstration outside NMED, etc.

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LANL to restack nuclear waste drums

The New Mexico Environment Department says the old earth-covered stacks violate the law because the drums can't be inspected for leaks.

BY JOHN FLECK
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

After spending 12 years stacking 16,600 radioactive-waste drums one way, Los Alamos National Laboratory plans to spend $43 million over the next 10 years restacking them.

The reason: the New Mexico Environment Department says the old earth-covered stacks violate the law because the drums can't be inspected for leaks.

At the time the drums were stacked, the method was legal, say laboratory officials. But the law has changed, so the drums will be restacked.

The restacking involves a laborious process in which the old drums are uncovered, inspected, and moved to new storage structures being built on asphalt pads nearby, said Mike Baker, manager of the project.

It will take 10 years to do it, Baker said.

State officials defend their decision to require Los Alamos to move the drums, saying it is the only way to ensure they are not leaking.

The plan to move the drums is part of an agreement between the state Environment Department and the laboratory. Attorneys are putting the final touches on the agreement, which is expected to be completed soon, possibly this week.

The Department of Energy, which owns Los Alamos, already has approved the agreement.

Officials with the other two parties involved — the state and the University of California, which manages Los Alamos for the DOE — said this week they expect the deal to be signed soon.

The agreement will settle an enforcement action brought by the Environment Department on Jan. 28 against Los Alamos for violations of waste-storage rules.

The Environment Department had proposed a $1.6 million fine, which would have been the largest ever levied by the state. Neither side would discuss the final size of the fine, but it is expected to be substantially less than originally proposed.

The major cost for Los Alamos, however, will not be the fine but the $43 million cost of fixing the problems identified by the state.

The drum-stacking problem dates to 1979, when new Energy Department procedures were established for storing radioactive waste being held for eventual disposal at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, a proposed nuclear-waste dump in southeastern New Mexico.

The offending drums contain lab-

See LANL ▸ PAGE 3

LANL to restack nuclear waste

From PAGE 1

oratory trash, such as old gloves and tools, that are contaminated with traces of plutonium and other hazardous chemicals. Most of the waste has been immobilized in concrete.

The drums are stacked on three asphalt pads on a mesa six miles southeast of the laboratory's main building complex.

The stacks are covered with a plywood structure, then a layer of plastic and a layer of dirt.

At the time the drums were put there, the Energy Department believed the configuration was the best way to temporarily store the drums until WIPP was ready, lab officials say.

Now, regulations have changed, and present standards require regular inspections of the drums to make sure they are not leaking.

Since 1991, all new drums of waste have been stored on an asphalt pad beneath a rigid tentlike structure where they can be regularly inspected.

So far, there is no evidence the buried drums have leaked, though an inspection last year did uncover a pin-size hole in one drum and corrosion on eight of the other 100 drums exhumed for examination.

"We don't know that there's been any releases," said Environment Department spokesman John Geddie earlier this year, "but that's the bottom line — that we don't know."

The difficulty of determining whether any drums have leaked is compounded by the fact that the drums are stored atop an old dump for low-level radioactive waste used in the 1950s, Baker said.

Using first-year funding of $8.4 million, laboratory workers will begin building asphalt pads for the new storage area adjacent to the old storage area in the coming year. Tentlike structures covered with vinyl will be built on the pads.

To unstack the old drums, workers will build a sealed, filtered tent over the old stacks of drums and begin removing them and inspecting them one by one before placing them in new storage structures.

Any drums found to have leaks will be repacked in sealed containers, Baker said.

SANTA FE

THE NEW MEXICAN FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10, 1993 SECTION B

State agency cuts LANL's fine to $700,000

Deal requires lab to uncover, inspect waste

By KEITH EASTHOUSE
The New Mexican

The state Environment Department has scaled back the fine it will impose on Los Alamos National Laboratory for improperly storing nuclear waste from $1.6 million to $700,000, according to the terms of an agreement made public Thursday.

The penalty, while less than half of what the state originally proposed, still would be the largest ever issued by the Environment Department, according to Kathleen Sisneros, director of the department's Water and Waste Management Division.

The penalty is part of an agreement that calls upon the laboratory to uncover 16,600 waste drums — which are covered with earth on outdoor pads — inspect and restack them over a 10-year period at a cost of $43 million.

The agreement has been signed by officials at the laboratory, the Department of Energy and the University of California, which manages the lab for DOE, according to Rick Malaspina, a university spokesman.

Sisneros said Environment Department Secretary Judith Espinosa is studying the agreement and was expected to sign it today.

The agreement requires the lab to pay $500,000 of the fine within 30 days after Espinosa approves it. The remaining $200,000 must be paid by Sept. 30.

Also, the agreement calls upon the laboratory to build storage domes for the drums, which contain plutonium-contaminated trash destined for ultimate disposal at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad.

While the state does not have regulatory authority over radioactive waste, it does have jurisdiction over waste that is contaminated with radioactive and chemical substances.

According to lab spokesman John Gustafson, the state has regulatory authority in this case because there is a likelihood that some of the drums contain such waste, called "mixed waste."

The Environment Department first discovered that the drums were stored in such a way that regular inspections were impossible — a violation of the Federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act — in 1992.

The state was particularly concerned because evidence of corrosion was found in eight of the drums during a partial excavation of the drums conducted by the lab in the spring of 1992. Additionally, a ninth drum was found to have a hole in it the size of a pin.

The state wants to know if other drums are corroded and, if they are, whether they are leaking radioactive material into the environment.

"We're not saying the drums are leaking," commented Environment Department spokesman John Geddie. "What we are saying is that we don't know" because of the way the drums are stored.

Determining whether any leakage has taken place is complicated by the fact that the drums are located atop an old waste disposal site. Lab officials have maintained that there is no evidence radioactive materials have escaped.

The lab began stacking the drums under a layer of earth in the late 1970s, a time when such a storage method was in line with regulations. But when the regulations changed in the 1980s, the lab failed to change storage practices.

Since 1991, the lab has stored drums containing plutonium waste in storage structures.

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Thursday, December 23, 1993 Two sections, 28 pages 50¢

CONTRACT

(from Page 1)

"He was very professional and up-front. He said he had a contract with lab to find out what the concerns of activist groups are, and said 'I want to be very up-front with you, get to know you and your concerns a little bit better.' I thought that was a decent way to do things, and I think that he has been very professional throughout." Mello said.

Mello said he talked with Covalenka in the first week of November, in mid-November, and last during the second week in December.

Otway said there now is "no contractual obligation to do the ... work."

"Several people said, hey, this could be misinterpreted," Otway said. The lab didn't want to "raise suspicion" that LANL was surreptitiously gathering information on activists, so the work was officially stopped "a couple weeks ago," Otway said.

A task order describing the contract said Benchmark should "attend the meetings of at least three environmental groups, and identify at least three key environmental activists. In a written report, identify the major environmental, health, safety, and health concerns that the groups in general, and the key activists in particular, might have regarding waste management activities at the laboratory."

After identifying the activists, Benchmark should meet with the activists and propose one-on-one meetings with the appropriate EM-7 management and technical experts.

Benchmark then should write a report "summarizing the information gained from these interactions," the task order said.

Another part of the order said Benchmark should do the same — identify, approach, and meet with environmental activists — at neighboring pueblos.

The order said Benchmark should "contact a representative number" of activists at San Ildefonso, Santa Clara, Nambe, Tesuque, Pojoaque, Santo Domingo, and Cochiti pueblos.

Benchmark also is tasked with looking over the past public relations records of EM-7, and to "develop a written analysis of lessons that should be learned from these previous experiences."

The contract probably "came out of the lack of coordination and quality control" that SIO now is supposed to provide, Otway said. The Waste Management Group probably "didn't know that some of us were following interest groups and knew what their concerns were, and were engaged in long-term dialogue with the best intentions," Otway said.

Otway said Covalenka wrote a draft report on Mello, but that it wouldn't be a part of any official report, and that Mello would be receiving a copy.

What Covalenka found "was essentially accurate and confirmed what we knew anyway," Otway said.

All Covalenka did was go to public meetings, listen to concerns, take notes, then then call up activists, tell what he was doing, and ask to talk with the activists, Otway said.

Rita Carnes, managing director of Benchmark Environmental Corp., said the 80-person Albuquerque-based company provides consulting services for technical and regulatory aspects of waste management, environmental management, and radiation safety issues. The company, which also has a White Rock office, contracts with several other clients besides LANL, she said.

Lab cancels its contract to identify activists

By STEPHEN T. SHANKLAND
Monitor Staff Writer

Los Alamos National Laboratory's Waste Management Group hired a contractor to attend meetings of environmentalist groups, then identify and approach "key environmental activists" in the groups and in surrounding pueblos.

The contract also said the contractor should meet with the activists, write a report, then "facilitate" meetings with the activists and Waste Management Group's technical experts and managers.

But because the action could be perceived as suspicious, the contract subsequently has been canceled, Stakeholder Involvement Office (SIO) Director Harry Otway said Wednesday.

The recently-formed SIO took over the contract from the Waste Management Group when some public involvement work at LANL was consolidated in SIO.

"I'm convinced there was no attempt to surreptitiously find out anything," Otway said. "It was a well-meaning attempt by technical people to find out what it was about their programs (that) people were concerned about. They sort of stumbled into it naively without (being aware of the) political pitfalls."

LANL's Waste Management Group (formerly EM-7 and now CST-7) contracted Albuquerque-based Benchmark Environmental Corp. to perform the work.

Under the contract, one person, [illegible] Covalenka, approached

Asked why the lab would hire a third party to handle public interactions, Otway said the Waste Management Group probably thought the external group would be seen as more neutral and objective.

But Greg Mello of the Santa Fe-based Los Alamos Study Group, who met with Covalenka, said the contract either was a "dumb idea" with good intentions or else had a more nefarious purpose than just establishing a dialogue with activists.

Mello said Waste Management personnel already know who the activists are and could simply have called up and talked. Mello said simply talking during a long lunch is a direct way to communicate. "It's much superior, and quite bit cheaper," he said.

Mello said Waste Management Group personnel told him that the contract's purpose was to build trust, but, "Hiring an intermediary to talk to someone you already know is not a trust-building exercise," Mello said.

"It would be so much better to put that kind of effort into responding to the direct requests that we have made to them about what we think," Mello said.

On the darker side, Mello said the lab could be "utilizing a contractor to discover the strengths and weaknesses of environmental groups — what points of might be divisive within the community, what their resources are, what litigation might be planned. It would be very useful to know a great deal about the opposition," Mello said.

Covalenka's approach was above-

LANL Gropes To Find a New Way

Enchanted Times f/w 1993

by Mary Riseley
Los Alamos Study Group

The Cold War may be over, but the war Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) has been waging for 50 years against the pristine environment of the Pajarito Plateau may be heating up.

Only last year Department of Energy facilities at LANL were placed fully under the jurisdiction of federal environmental laws that have governed you, me and private corporations since the Sixties. LANL's previous "culture" of unlimited federal dollars and environmental nonchalance in the name of "national security" does not square well with the newly mandated public responsibility, so lab officials are struggling to adjust

Here is an update.

The Controlled Air Incinerator. Located in a 20-year old building used until 1987 for research and development, the incinerator project is hiring new staff and drafting an Environmental Assessment (EA) due out in February 1994. A trial burn is scheduled for a year later. LANL hopes to begin burning 1,236 cubic feet of transuranic waste and 530 cubic feet of mixed waste per year at the Controlled Air Incinerator (CAI) by August 1995. This timetable assumes that the EA will yield a "Finding of No Significant Impact" ("FONSI," in bureaucratic parlance) relieving them of the responsibility to produce a full-blown Environmental Impact Statement rather than the cursory EA.

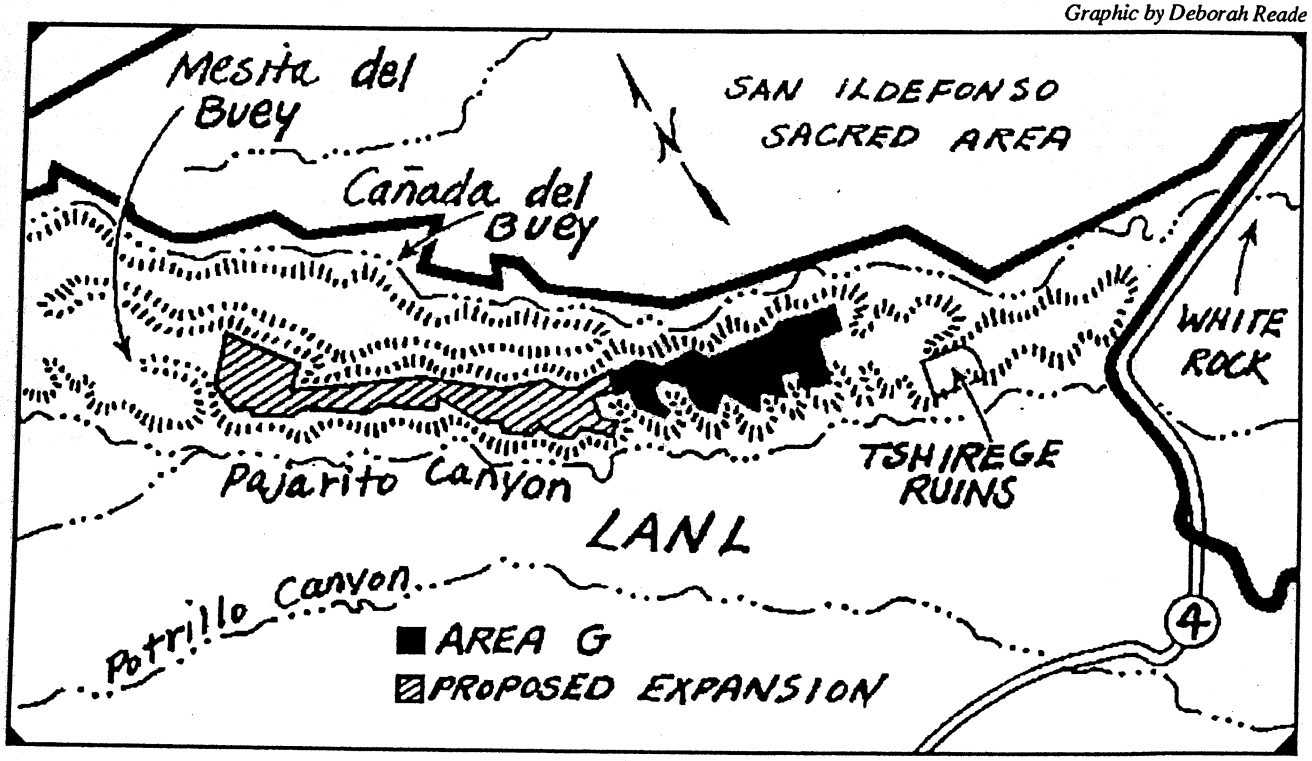
CAI Project Manager Kathryn Elsberry has said the incinerator is "the only option" for reducing the volume of LANL's legacy of wastes. It will take three years to incinerate all the backlog of thousands of barrels of waste. After that, CAI would be ready to take wastes from DOE weapons complexes around the nation.

Besides the hurdles posed by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the project still has to go through the permitting process at the state level for the Resource, Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA).

Area G Expansion. LANL's current radioactive dump lies immediately adjacent to Tshirege, the largest Anasazi ruin on the Pajarito Plateau. It began taking radioactive waste in 1957. Since 1971, 381,000 cubic feet of LANL-generated transuranic waste has been stored here; no one knows how much went in before 1971, since records are scanty. Wastes were just interred without liners or caps, in bulldozed pits.

None of this old waste meets acceptance criteria for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, so LANL hopes to build a new treatment facility, possibly on a site even nearer to Tshirege. The plan is to send one TRUPACT truck every other day from Area G to WIPP until 2013, and then one every two weeks indefinitely. It seems to be unthinkable that LANL might one day cease fathering radioactive waste! Right now annual rates of radwaste generation at LANL stand at 160,000 cubic feet of low level waste and 150 cubic feet of transuranic (TRU) waste.

Graphic by Deborah Reade

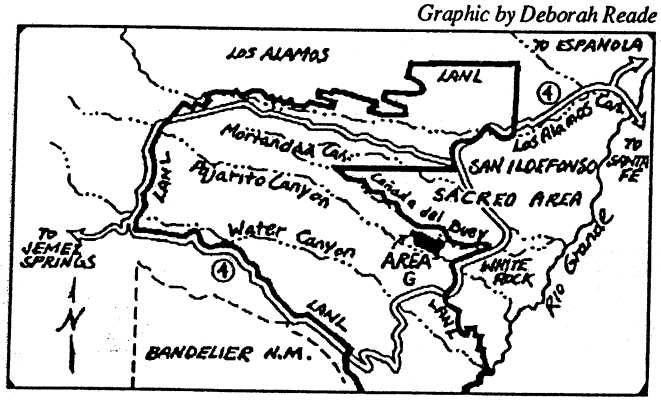


LANL's existing dump is expected to keep taking waste through late 1995, but that depends on what the clean up effort at Los Alamos discovers. Recently a building formerly used as a Catholic church in downtown Los Alamos was found to be sitting on 54 dump truck loads of soil contaminated from an old septic tank dating back to the Manhattan Project. It contained plutonium, americium, cesium and other lethal materials.

The EA for the Area G Expansion has been reviewed by DOE headquarters, and will soon be released to the N.M. Environment Department and various Pueblo governments before going out for public review and comment.

Herman Agoyo, executive director of the Eight Northern Pueblo Indian Council, recently showed up at a scheduled tour of Area G with his young son. LANL freaked, but the point was made. "If I'm safe here, why not Jordan? Are we really considering future generations as we handle these toxic materials?"

Graphic by Deborah Reade



The Mixed Waste Disposal Facility. All mixed waste generated at LANL is currently stored on-site. LANL says this is due to lack of available treatment and disposal alternatives. This new dump would be twice the size of WIPP, to hold 475,000 cubic yards of mixed waste. It would be located on the south side of Pajarito Road where pits 2,000 feet long and 25 feet deep would be divided into 25,000 cubic yard segments.

The pits would be double-lined with an operational cover, leachate collection system and a RCRA-approved cap. There would be an on- and off-site monitoring system for air and water, pit leachate monitoring, and vadose zone monitoring. But RCRA only requires that the liner be monitored for 30 years.

The draft EA may be ready for internal review by January 1994. As with the CAI, the timeline for construction of this facility precludes preparation for a full EIS, they say.

This is a huge dump. Where are these wastes going to come from? Isn't the lab weaning itself from weapons production? How did DOE arrive at this estimated size if what is going to be buried here isn't already known? Will this site be receiving wastes from other DOE facilities?

The Hazardous Waste Treatment Facility. The EA for this project is in lag time, because of a recent decision to combine it with one for a proposed Mixed Waste Storage and Receiving Facility intended to serve as its staging area.

At present, hazardous wastes are shipped to off-site commercial facilities. Final designs for the new facility are slated for January 30, 1995. It will house the treatment processes for low level waste and whatever wastes are not amenable to off-site treatment or incineration.

Given all this new activity, does it strike you that LANL is unofficially positioning itself to become a major dumping ground and waste treatment facility for the entire nuclear weapons complex? The CAI burning wastes from Hanford and Savannah River, then vitrifying the ash for burial... where? At the Mixed Waste Disposal Facility? And we haven't even talked about the Accelerator Transmutation of Waste program which LANL is pushing hard and the price tag for which would be astronomical.

But LANL managers insist they want to do all this with public approval, or at least, acceptance. LANL is infected by the so-called "Keystone process" for public involvement. In fact, both DOE and LANL are talking about a citizen advisory process with a purview larger than just clean-up. The DOE Site Specific Advisory Board process would provide a budget of up to $250,000 per year; the process mandates a self-selection element to comprise the board.

A first step in establishing such an advisory group for LANL was taken at an internal "brainstorming" session in late September. Attending were some 50 LANL and DOE personnel and four outside witnesses: Evelyn Vigil from the Los Alamos Monitor, Helen Stambro from the Los Alamos Working Group and two members of the Los Alamos Study Group.

The next step is for a parallel meeting or meetings to be held in northern New Mexico for member of the public at large to express their views. Selection procedures and draft charters from similar groups mandated at Hanford, Rocky Flats, Pantex, Oak Ridge and Savannah River have been obtained for review. Anyone interested in participating is encouraged to contact Christina Armijo at DOE-LAAO, 665-5025 or Harry Otway at LANL 665-4213.

Margaret Mead said long ago that only a small group of committed people could change the course of history. Where are we and what are we doing about this?

Los Alamos Study Group is a member of the All Peoples Coalition.