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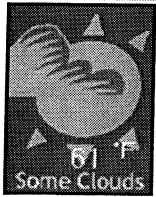


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Los Alamos cleanup: convenient fictions

Greg Mello

If you're confused about the environmental situation at Los Alamos, you're not alone. It's hard for reporters and editors, let alone ordinary citizens and officials, to sift fact from fiction.

The fiction du jour is that the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) has signed a cleanup agreement with the Department of Energy (DOE) and the University of California (UC). Is there really an agreement? It wasn't available to the news media. It will supposedly be available in early May. Why the delay?

According to news accounts, the supposed agreement closely follows the proposed Corrective Action Order issued by NMED in 2002. But that order doesn't ask for cleanup, just more background investigations which stop far short of cleanup, the overall effect of which is to push cleanup farther into an uncertain future.

This convenient fiction is only the tip of the iceberg. What also isn't being reported is that the dumping of waste in unlined pits and trenches at Los Alamos continues. Neither DOE nor NMED have any plan to stop dumping or ever remove what is in these pits. Much of the waste being buried is already coming from the lab's growing programs in plutonium warhead core ("pit") manufacturing and testing. Mr. Governor, we have a cleanup gap, and it's growing.

Once it's admitted that LANL has never stopped dumping, and that the entire "cleanup" story is largely a charade, a whole list of questions suddenly clamor for attention. How much waste is being dumped? What is it? Where will the new dumps be, when the current one fills up in a few

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more years? Why hasn't the state ever required a closure plan for the dumps, or a cleanup plan?

These hazards are long-term, not short-term, ones. The Rio Grande is not going to be significantly contaminated by Los Alamos seepage in the coming decades. And LANL's mess can never contaminate public water supplies developed on the east side of that river (like Santa Fe's).

Small quantities of contaminants have been found in springs feeding the river, but there are no sources of contaminants which could raise the concentrations in the river to within even one percent of the most stringent standard being considered by the EPA. This "danger" is the kind of problem Los Alamos and NMED public relations people are quite comfortable in discussing, both knowing full well that in the final analysis, neither party need do anything about it. It's a nice, safe distraction.

This is not to say that "dilution is the solution to pollution." But the fact is that what can be added by groundwater seepage from LANL is extremely minute.

On a far different scale are the major, growing sources of land contamination at Los Alamos, which will be a hazard for millennia to come. In the long run, everything in them will be elsewhere. When this will happen, and at what rate, cannot be predicted. There is a lot of fissile material in there, enough for many bombs - a very attractive nuisance. When - not if - these mother lodes of contamination are breached, winds and waters will take their contents away, downstream and downwind, to the lips and lungs of our children's children.

Want to clean up Los Alamos? Stop the dumping first. It won't be easy; a lot of influential people would instead prefer that LANL build up its plutonium facilities and manufacture more pits here (instead of elsewhere). The future history of our region is already being written, from out of state as usual. If we want a better story we had learn how to write it ourselves.

Greg Mello is director of the Los Alamos Study Group.

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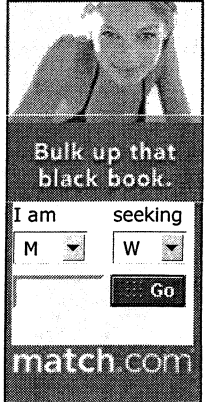
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Scientist Wants To Rank LANL Cleanup

BY ADAM RANKIN
Journal Staff Writer

John Till wants to do for Los Alamos National Laboratory what he says has never been done at any U.S. Department of Energy facility: develop a comprehensive priority list for waste cleanup that would put the most threatening sources of contamination for humans and the environment first in line to be fixed.

He also wants to develop a process to determine the order of that list based in part on public input because, as he says, not everyone has the same tolerance for pollution.

For the public to be truly involved, Till said every bit of environmental monitoring data from the laboratory and the state needs to be made easily accessible to the public through an independent, third party and understandable so citizens can be part of the decision-making process.

It may sound intuitive, but Till, a scientist who for the last 27 years has specialized in evaluating risk at DOE sites, said all this has never been done before.

"This is absolutely groundbreaking for any DOE site," he said during a recent interview in Santa Fe.

He said he's got the full support of LANL director Pete Nanos and DOE headquarters in Washington. Now, Till is trying to get the public's support.

He said he begins every project under the assumption that he has no public credibility. "We will do some astonishing things with this project, and we will earn it," he said.

That process begins May 19 when Till and his team of 16 scientists with his Risk Assessment Corp. will outline their project to the public at 6 p.m. in Pojoaque at the Cities of Gold Casino.

Till wants to do it all — including setting up a system so the environmental data and priority list can be updated in the future — within three years and for less than \$6 million, funded by the University of California, which operates LANL.

He's off to a good start. Since March 2003, Till and his team have transformed LANL's various environmental data, which he said was a "mess," into a uniform, standard database that is easy to understand and access.

The next stage of the project — called **RACER for Risk Analysis, Communication, Evaluation and Reduction** — is developing the priority list for waste cleanup.

As reasonable as such a list



EDDIE MOORE/JOURNAL

Thousands of 55-gallon drums of transuranic waste await shipment from LANL's Area G to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad. A new study proposes to create for the first time a priority cleanup list for sites such as these at LANL based on risk and public input.

might at first seem, New Mexico's environmental community recoils at the notion of a risk-based cleanup strategy, which many see as code for avoiding cleanup.

"This is all part of a national DOE plan to avoid compliance with the law," said Joni Arends, director of Santa Fe's Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety. "We want hard and fast numbers and procedures and protection instead of these veils that are being put up that are going to reduce risk based on nothing."

"Our big concern about this RACER project is that it will allow DOE to just pave over waste sites" by dismissing some risk as inconsequential, she said.

Part of the problem is that Till's RACER project comes on the heels of DOE's own attempt at a nationwide risk-based cleanup strategy for its sites, called the Risk-Based End State vision.

Its goal is to determine how clean certain waste sites need to be based on how the land will be used in the future. In many cases, such as at most of LANL's material disposal areas, plans are to monitor and leave much of the waste in place, while ensuring risk of human exposure is minimal.

From California to Ohio, state and even federal environmental officials criticized the plans for individual DOE sites as lacking sufficient public input and for defying current cleanup agreements and regulations.

DOE's so-called RBES process, which is still ongoing, raised the ire of environmental groups across the country because they perceived it as a way for DOE to avoid cleanup.

Regional environmental groups, now thoroughly skepti-

cal of risk-based approaches, have the same fears about Till's RACER project.

"There is clearly a strong tendency on the lab's part to explain away the need for cleanup based on risk assessments in contrast to some kind of absolute cleanup standards," said Jay Coghlan, director of Nuclear Watch of New Mexico.

"The lab's game here is that they know they've already done these calculations and there won't be serious risk (to the public) off site, so the calculation of risk will show that nothing needs to be done," said Greg Mello, director of the Los Alamos Study Group.

State Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry also voiced his concerns that Till's work not be a substitute or interfere with the state's plans for cleanup at LANL.

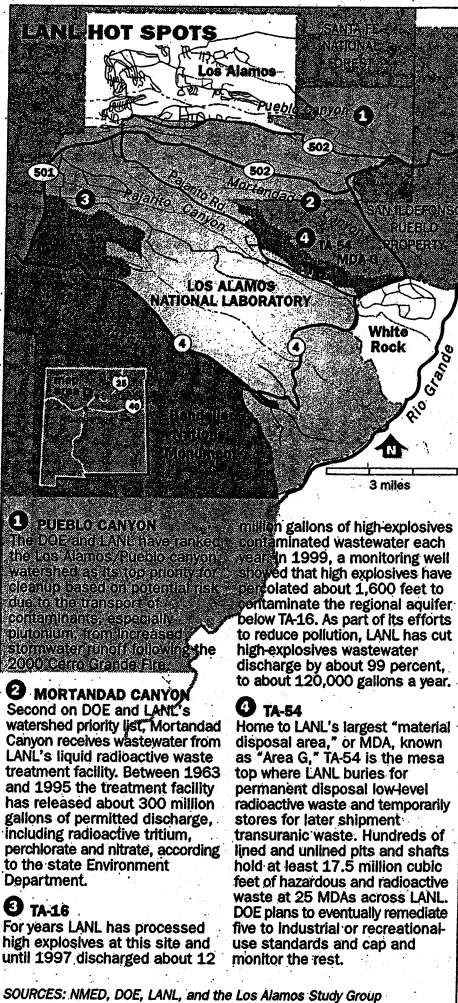
"My one concern is that a risk-based assessment should not be used as an excuse to not clean something up," he said.

At the same time, Curry said Till has helped foster communications between the state and LANL and that his environmental database will be useful for the state, LANL and the public in the future.

Until now, cleanup at DOE sites has been primarily driven by the need to comply with regulations, whether state or federal, and not necessarily with the goal of reducing risk, Till said.

"This is above and beyond compliance," he said, stressing that a priority list should not interfere with current cleanup or with any public health or environmental regulations, nor should it be a means to downplay the need for cleanup.

"If what I am doing is used as an excuse to not do something, then I will fail," he said. "It shouldn't happen if the people



- 1 PUEBLO CANYON**
The DOE and LANL have ranked the Los Alamos Pueblo Canyon waste sites as top priority for cleanup based on potential risk due to the transport of contaminants, especially plutonium, from increased stormwater runoff following the 2000 Cerro Grande fire. million gallons of high-explosives contaminated wastewater each year. In 1999, a monitoring well showed that high explosives have seeped about 1,600 feet to contaminate the regional aquifer below TA-16. As part of its efforts to reduce pollution, LANL has cut high-explosives wastewater discharge by about 99 percent, to about 120,000 gallons a year.
- 2 MORTANDAD CANYON**
Second on DOE and LANL's watershed priority list, Mortandad Canyon receives wastewater from LANL's liquid radioactive waste treatment facility. Between 1963 and 1995 the treatment facility has released about 300 million gallons of permitted discharge, including radioactive tritium, perchlorate and nitrate, according to the state Environment Department.
- 3 TA-16**
For years LANL has processed high explosives at this site and until 1997 discharged about 12 million gallons of high-explosives contaminated wastewater each year. In 1999, a monitoring well showed that high explosives have seeped about 1,600 feet to contaminate the regional aquifer below TA-16. As part of its efforts to reduce pollution, LANL has cut high-explosives wastewater discharge by about 99 percent, to about 120,000 gallons a year.
- 4 TA-54**
Home to LANL's largest "material disposal area," or MDA, known as "Area G," TA-54 is the mesa top where LANL buries for permanent disposal low-level radioactive waste and temporarily stores for later shipment transuranic waste. Hundreds of lined and unlined pits and shafts hold at least 17.5 million cubic feet of hazardous and radioactive waste at 25 MDAs across LANL. DOE plans to eventually remediate five to industrial or recreational-use standards and cap and monitor the rest.

SOURCES: NMED, DOE, LANL, and the Los Alamos Study Group
CATHRYN CUNNINGHAM/JOURNAL

powerful forum for public participation exists but is going unexercised.

He said the state Environment Department could allow the public to engage in adversarial hearings with LANL over its various state permits "so that results could be litigated."

"That would be real citizen involvement, because it gives power to the citizens," Mello said.

But LANL wants people to think of themselves as partner in cleanup with the laborator instead of adversaries, he said. Mello said RACER's proposed public involvement to establish a priority cleanup list means nothing because "it provides no firm standards of performance and no firm avenue for legal redress."

For their part, LANL officials, who have committed to continuous risk reduction, are excited about the RACER project because they hope it will set a benchmark by which their environmental remediation can be checked year after year.

"What continuous risk reduction will do more than anything is show how we can improve year after year," explains Doug Stavert, LANL's program manager for environmental protection.

The RACER project "will allow us to show how we improve year after year," he said.

By including the public in the process, Stavert said RACER will show people how LANL and DOE make cleanup decisions.

"Right now, it is very difficult for the laboratory to show how we make those decisions and frankly, some of those decisions need to be shared, he said. "We recognize that we can't do this alone as a laboratory, we need stake holders."

Despite the criticisms and the challenge before his team, Till remains hopeful because he said there is now no systematic way for cleanup to progress at LANL.

"Say you get a top 10 (cleanup) list, then what about the other 1,990 sites? What's the order, then?" he said.

become involved," which isn't happening now, Till said.

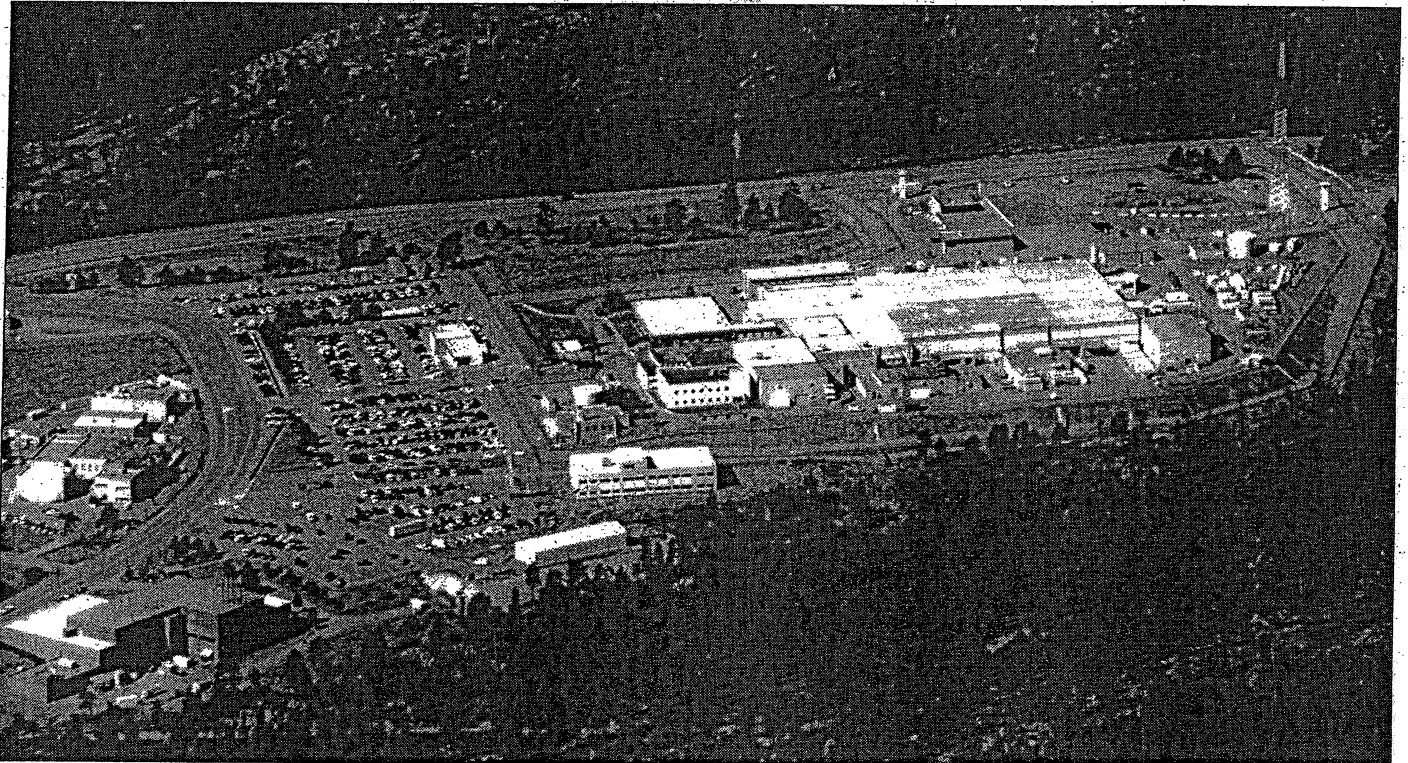
"Where in the process (for deciding cleanup) right now do stake holders have a voice? Somebody tell me," Till said.

"Where are the stake holders sitting down with regulators?"

But Mello, who said Till is both a "scholar and a gentleman" and the best man for the job, argues a potentially more

August 15 Week in Review August

LANL faulted for not cleaning up



Courtesy Greg Mello, director, Los Alamos Study Group

In Technical Area 55 at Los Alamos National Laboratory, 4,315 containers of dangerous materials, such as plutonium, must be repackaged or disposed of by 2010. The project was supposed to be finished by 2002.

Lab's repeated delays cost taxpayers

Two Los Alamos National Laboratory workers were exposed to plutonium last year while handling a deteriorated package of rags during an inventory.

On Thursday, the U.S. Department of Energy inspector general cited this case in saying the health of other lab workers is at stake, because the lab is far behind schedule in stabilizing radioactive materials. Further, the lab's repeated delays are costing taxpayers \$78 million more than planned, according to the audit report, with the total project escalating to \$183 million.

Under the original plan, LANL was supposed to stabilize radioactive materials by 2002. Now, the deadline has been pushed to 2010.

Plutonium metals, oxides and residues at

Technical Area 55 — the lab's main plutonium vault — are kept in containers the report says are not acceptable for long-term storage. "As such, there is the possibility that the containers could leak and workers could be exposed to radiation, resulting in serious health consequences," the inspector general's report said.

But it's possible employees haven't accomplished all the tasks because Los Alamos lab didn't have enough money for the scope of the project. The inspector general blamed the problem in part on inadequate DOE funding.

"The (Energy) Department had not made the effort a priority," the inspector general's report said, noting that Los Alamos received only 58 percent of the funding it requested between 1997 and 2002, and only 78 percent of

what it requested in 2001 and 2002.

The Energy Department has since increased funding to Los Alamos for stabilizing materials, and the project should be funded fully through 2010.

In 1994, the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board told numerous DOE sites to stabilize their dangerous materials. The safety board is an agency Congress established in 1988 to provide oversight of the nuclear-weapons complex.

Like Los Alamos, Rocky Flats in Colorado and Savannah River Site in South Carolina missed the 2002 deadline, but only by one to four years. LANL stands out, according to the report. **Friday, A-1**