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## Area G expansion raises concern

### R Forum to address future of LANL's radioactive dump

By DIANA HEIL The New Mexican

Just 20 minutes from the Santa Fe Plaza — and a mile from the community of White Rock — a huge inventory of low-level radioactive waste is buried in unlined pits and shafts.

In Los Alamos National Laboratory's Area G, a dump that dates back to 1957, some nuclear-weapons waste is covered with only a few inches of dirt. By contrast, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad stores radioactive material 2,000 feet underground.

Area G's past is a sore spot among environmentalists. But so is its future. While considering measures for cleaning up Area G, lab officials are planning on expanding the size of Area G from 63 acres to 93 acres as early as this fall.

At a May 3 public forum in Santa Fe, Northern New Mexico Citizens' Advisory Board, a federally funded group that advises the Energy Department on environmental issues concerning the lab, will bring together all the players so community members can be informed.

Area G is the largest of more than 20 radioactive waste dumps at Los Alamos. It sits on Mesita del Buey, above the regional aquifer that supplies water to Los Alamos, Santa Fe, Pojoaque and Albuquerque.

"We do not have enough information to ensure the public knows what the longterm impact to the environment will be," Jim Brannon, vice chairman of Northern New Mexico Citizens' Advisory Board, said.

Perspectives on Area G are far-flung.

"If this were a municipal landfill, you would never get away with it," James Bearzi, chief of the state Environment Department's Hazardous Waste Bureau, said.

A city dump has tighter controls than Area G, and oversight from the state and the federal Environmental Protection Agency have been limited, he said.

"Citizens and legislators are never given the opportunity to say whether the engineering controls (at Area G) are appropriate because DOE is self-regulated," Bearzi said.

But lab officials beg to differ with the analogy.

City dumps have different monitoring requirements because they can receive a variety of wastes, including small quantities of hazardous waste such as paint, oil, pesticides, herbicides, batteries and computer parts, lab spokeswoman Kathy DeLucas said. Area G, however, only accepts radioactive waste.

"Before waste is disposed of at Area G, we know exactly what we are receiving," DeLucas said. "The waste goes through a very rigorous inspection, characterization and certification process. ... It's a world of difference from your ordinary landfill, and there is no comparison."

The state has a regulatory hook on the situation because of hazardous waste disposed there in the 1980s and 1990s. Under the state Hazardous Waste Act, the Environment Department can impose closure.

But many questions will be up for debate. What gets closed — the hazardous waste part of Area G only or the entire site? And what does closure mean — digging up the old stuff and sending it for storage elsewhere or capping the waste on site for years to come?

The implications are farreaching, not only for people who drink the water and breathe the air, but workers who would be digging 80 feet deep into this type of waste. Everyone from Santa Fe to Los Alamos — and in between — has a great need to care, Brannon said.

Twice, Los Alamos lab submitted closure plans for Area G to the state Environment Department, which deemed it inadequate. By this time next year, permits will be due for ongoing waste management at the lab and closure of the old units.

"Under current environmental standards, Area G would never be permitted today," Bearzi said.

The extent of environmental contamination caused by Area G is under investigation. Though releases of known carcinogens have been documented, "nobody knows how far or how much has migrated," Bearzi said.

Greg Mello, who is well acquainted with Area G from his former work as a hydrologist at the state Environment Department and his current work as director of the disarmament nonprofit called the Los Alamos Study Group, said the dump's proximity to springs is part of the problem. "Area G is untenable as a long-term waste site," he said.

His solution would be to dig up and sort the old waste, then ship the dangerous stuff away and bury the other stuff where it is.

The lab's new waste should be packaged, properly characterized and shipped to other sites, such as the Nevada Test Site, which is situated in a drier climate, or WIPP, which is deeper, he said. He also hopes people will explore why Los Alamos continues to make so much nuclear waste.

"Area G is not a health problem today to anyone, except to people who work there maybe," Mello said.

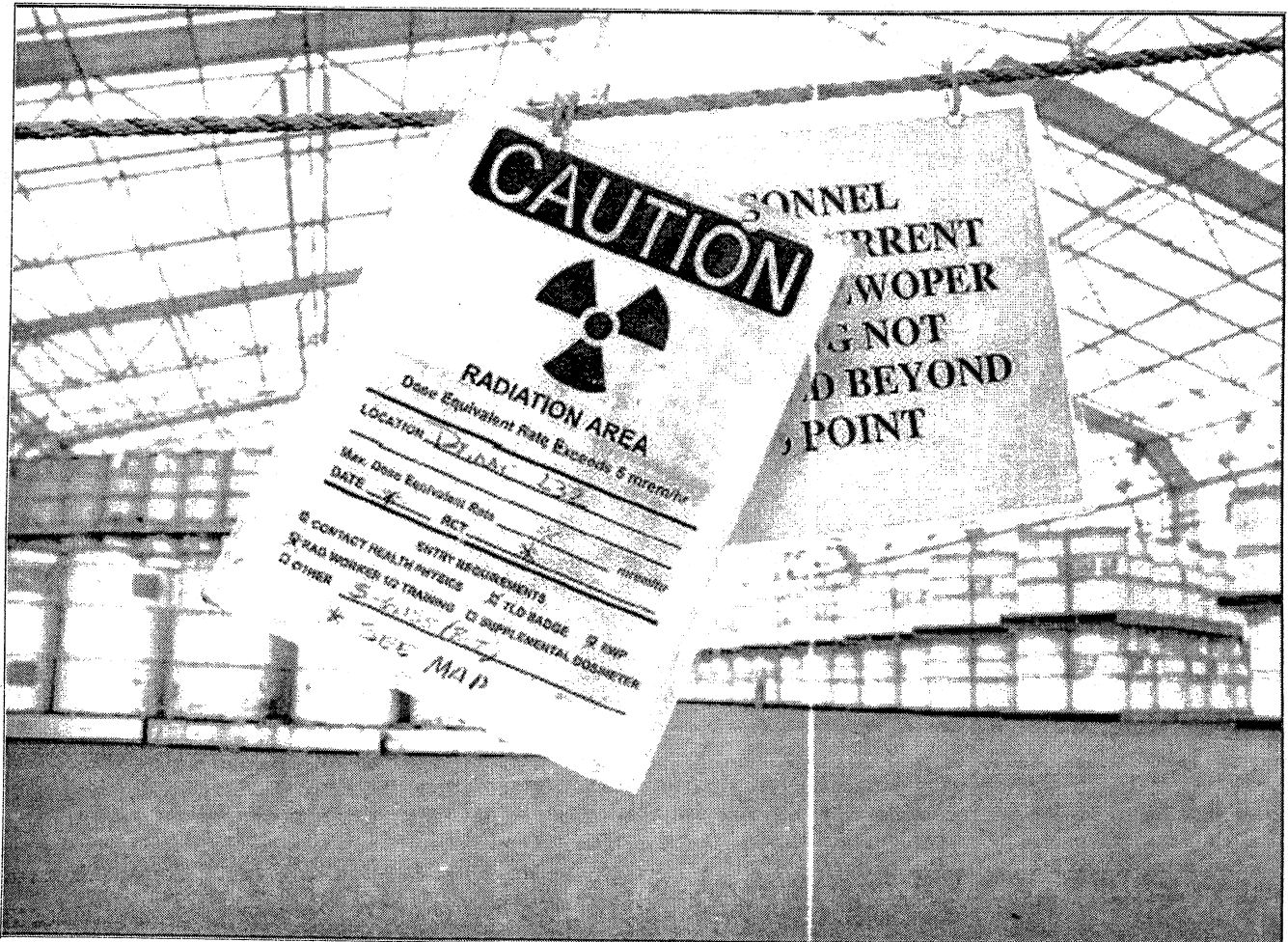
Instead, he frets about the waste falling into the wrong hands. "People could mine the dumps of Los Alamos for the material to build nuclear weapons," he said.

Through Mello's petition efforts, 4,000 people, 200 businesses and 100 organizations have requested that Area G be closed. Still, the battle won't be easy.

"This state has never been able to stand up to the labs," Mello said.



Courtesy photo/Northern New Mexico Citizens' Advisory Board Area G is the largest of more than 20 radioactive waste dumps at Los Alamos National Laboratory.



The radioactive waste disposal site dates back to 1957, and some nuclear weapons waste is covered with only a few inches of dirt. Lab officials are planning a cleanup of the site, and a May 3 forum in Santa Fe will bring together all the players so the public can be informed. **Clyde Mueller** *The New Mexican*

# Board takes a look at Area G

**ROGER SNODGRASS**  
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Monitor Assistant Editor

SANTA FE - Fashioning a blockbuster attraction out of a hazardous dump may be a tall order, but that's what the Northern New Mexico Citizens' Advisory Board wants to do on May 3.

The group that formally advises the Department of Energy on environmental cleanup at Los Alamos National Laboratory has prepared what it hopes will be a major educational forum, featuring controversial Area G, the lab's largest radioactive landfill area.

The Low-Level Radioactive Solid Waste Storage and Disposal Area, as it is also known, opened in 1957. The landfill began as a five-acre site, then grew to 37 acres in 1976.

It is now 66 acres, according to LANL, but may well be expanded again before it is eventually cleaned up and closed down.

In recent years it has been a sore point within the laboratory, attracting the scrutiny of regulators and the scorn of environmentalists.

"When will we know enough of what we need to know to prevent permanent and irrevocable damage to our environment?" asked Jim Brannon, NNM CAB vice chair during a press conference last week.

Although low levels of radioactive and hazardous wastes have been detected in the regional aquifer below Los Alamos, the true extent of the contamination is not yet known.

The lab's most recent environmental surveillance document for 2003 identified high levels of tritium in the south portion of Area G, near the shafts where radioactive tritium is stored, with levels "increasing over time."

The highest concentrations of plutonium isotopes were found in the northern and northeastern portions of the site.

## AREA G

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At its inception Area G was a step forward, an attempt by the laboratory to consolidate radioactive and chemical waste treatment and storage in a central location rather than leaving them up to individual facilities to manage, lab records show.

More than 10 million cubic feet of hazardous waste has flowed into Area G over the years, much of it buried in unlined pits, but not enough has flowed out to reduce the load placed on the high mesa environment.

Shipments going from LANL to the Waste Isolation Pilot Project near Carlsbad, were suspended in October 2003, until testing procedures could be improved at the DOE sites where the waste originated. Eighteen months later, and well behind schedule, shipments from LANL resumed on April 22.

Area G is located on Mesita del Buey, between Pajarito Canyon and Cañada del Buey in the east-central part of the laboratory in Technical Area 54, north of Pajarito Road.

It has been the target of several environmental campaigns against the laboratory.

Some 189 New Mexico businesses, including 117 in Santa Fe have joined Los Alamos Study Group's call for an end to disposal at Area G, said Greg Mello, the group's executive director.

Joni Arends of Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety will participate in one of the panels.

Board spokespersons said more than 1200 invitations have been sent out. Public service announcements are going out to radio stations and ads will be running in the local papers. The governor and the state's congressional delegation have been invited but not yet confirmed.

### Forum details

Date: Tuesday, May 3

Time: 4-5:30 p.m. poster sessions; 5:30-9 p.m. public meeting  
Place: Main administrative building, Jemez Conference Room,  
College of Santa Fe

Free to the public

Topics under discussion:

1. History of the radioactive landfill.
2. Current operations and past, present and future disposal.
3. Risks to the workers and the surrounding communities.
4. Future plans and final closure of the landfill.
5. Proposed expansion from 63 acres to 93 acres.

Questions to be answered:

1. Has Area G contaminated groundwater or soil?
2. What are the plans for expanding Area G?
3. How has NNMED/DOE regulated Area G?
4. How will Area G be closed and monitored?
5. How does WIPP relate to Area G?

Information: call 989-1662 or visit [www.nnmcab.org](http://www.nnmcab.org).

There will be presentations by all the major players, the lab, University of California, National Nuclear Security Administration, Department of Energy, Environmental Protection Agency, and the New Mexico Environment Department.

Brannon said that the poster session, panel discussions and public comment scheduled for the seminar were intended to inform and educate the public and to enable the board to take their opinions into account for recommendations on cleaning up and eventually closing out the waste at Area G.

"We think the public needs to know everything that's going on regarding that closure," said Jim Brannon, NNM CAB vice chair. "We'd like to hear what the public has to say and what the regulators have to say about that."

He and his colleagues on the board believe that putting Area G on the map and in the minds of area residents are the best ways to make

sure the clean up is handled with an informed public's interests in mind.

The NNM CAB is a federally chartered Site Specific Advisory Board, with an annual budget, staff, and offices in Santa Fe.

The CAB's recommendations relate to waste management, community involvement and environmental monitoring, surveillance and remediation at the laboratory.

The high profile forum reflects a special emphasis that the board has placed on public information and community participation lately.

The forum will take place on Tuesday, May 3, from 4 to 9 p.m. in the main administrative building at Santa Fe Community College in Santa Fe.

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URL: [http://www.abqjournal.com/north/347484north\\_news05-04-05.htm](http://www.abqjournal.com/north/347484north_news05-04-05.htm)

Wednesday, May 4, 2005

## LANL Wants Larger Nuke Storage Dump

By Adam Rankin

*Journal Staff Writer*

Protest was in the air at a Santa Fe meeting Tuesday night over a planned Los Alamos National Laboratory nuclear waste dump and storage facility expansion.

Panel members from the state Environment Department, the Energy Department and lab environmental watchdogs sparred among themselves and with confrontational audience members over the future of LANL's Area G.

Toward the end of the public forum, hosted and organized by the Northern New Mexico Citizens Advisory Board, audience members began distributing brightly colored posters expressing their discontent over LANL's waste production and management.

"Land of the labs, home of the waste," read one. "Like Waste? You'll Love Los Alamos," read another. "Largest nuclear waste dump in the Southwest 19 miles from the Santa Fe Plaza," read a third. And there were more.

In all, close to 150 people gathered at Santa Fe Community College to learn of LANL and DOE's plans to expand Area G by nearly 50 percent.

Tony Stanford, LANL's facilities and waste operations division leader, told the crowd that the laboratory is running out of space at Area G to permanently bury low-level radioactive waste it generates. The expansion, planned since 1999, will increase Area G by about 30 acres to 93 acres atop one of the mesas adjacent to San Ildefonso Pueblo.

Santa Fean Betsy Millard expressed bewilderment at the decision to expand the site while the lab continues to produce waste.

"You've just got to stop generating this waste" until you figure out how to deal with the waste that has already been buried, she said. "This is just simple, basic responsibility."

Former San Ildefonso Gov. Gilbert Sanchez used fiery language to draw attention to his people's plight, watching what is their ancestral land become contaminated by LANL's waste facilities.

"That is our sacred area," he said. "I don't think a synagogue or a Roman Catholic church would allow you to do the things that you are doing on our ancestral land."


Neil Weber, in charge of the pueblo's environment department, described the waste site and LANL's associated facilities above the pueblo land as "this

insult."

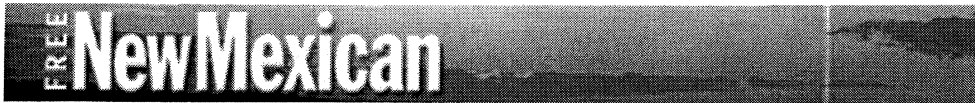
LANL and DOE officials sought to assure the audience that the lab's monitoring efforts and controls maintain radioactive and chemical emissions from the site well below federal standards.

Ken Hargis, LANL's acting environmental stewardship chief, said that LANL's radioactive emissions make up about 1 percent of the dose people receive in a year just from background sources, such as the sun. He said LANL air emissions of plutonium and americium are all under 5 percent of the federal limit.

To demonstrate their good faith, DOE's John Ordaz, the assistant chief for environmental management at LANL, offered to take anyone interested on a tour of the site and gave out his office and cell phone numbers to the crowd.

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## Los Alamos wants large nuclear storage dump

[print](#)

Associated Press  
May 5, 2005

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) - A proposal by the U.S. Department of Energy to expand a nuclear waste dump at Los Alamos National Laboratory is drawing criticism.

The nuclear weapons lab is running out of space to permanently bury low-level radioactive waste, said Tony Stanford, Los Alamos facilities and waste operations division leader. The expansion would increase the lab's Area G atop a mesa adjacent to San Ildefonso Pueblo by about 30 acres to 93 acres.

Former San Ildefonso Gov. Gilbert Sanchez has denounced the plan.

"That is our sacred area," Sanchez said. "I don't think a synagogue or a Roman Catholic church would allow you to do the things that you are doing to our ancestral land."

Neil Weber, who heads the pueblo's environment department, labeled the waste site overlooking pueblo land as "this insult."

They spoke at a public forum here Tuesday night that featured panel members from the state Environment Department, the DOE and watchdog groups. The forum sponsored by the Northern New Mexico Citizens Advisory Board drew about 150 people.

Members of the audience handed out brightly colored posters critical of the lab's waste production and management. "Land of the labs, home of the waste," read one, while another declared: "Largest nuclear waste dump in the Southwest 19 miles from the Santa Fe Plaza."

Betsy Millard of Santa Fe suggested the lab stop generating waste while it figures out how to deal with the amount it's already got.

"This is just simple, basic responsibility," she said.

DOE and lab officials said Los Alamos' monitoring efforts and controls keep emissions from radioactive sources and chemicals at the site well below federal limits.

Radioactive emissions from the lab account for about 1 percent of the dose people receive in a year from background sources such as the sun, said Ken Hargis, environmental stewardship chief for the lab. LANL air emissions of plutonium and americium are under 5 percent of the federal limit, Hargis said.

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**Thursday, May 5, 2005**

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Forum weighs nuke waste area expansion

ROGER SNODGRASS, [roger@lamonitor.com](mailto:roger@lamonitor.com), Monitor Assistant Editor

SANTA FE - A seminar Tuesday on Area G, Los Alamos National Laboratory's radioactive waste disposal area, revealed long-term expansion plans, while exposing rifts between the weapons lab and its political and environmental critics.

Tony Stanford, the lab's nuclear waste leader said that Area G, with only one of its excavated pits still active, is reaching its current capacity for low-level waste burial, but that the area still had a long future.

On the basis of an environmental assessment already made, the National Nuclear Security Administration has decided to expand operations into 30 acres of an untapped section in the area known as Zone 4.

The plan is to abide by the New Mexico Environmental Department's Consent Order, signed in March, which calls for the closure of Area G by 2015, but to begin opening the new zone within the next few months.

John Ordaz, DOE's assistant manager for environmental stewardship at the laboratory, said he had learned on a recent visit to Washington that a new site wide environmental impact statement would be done, because of new NNSA anticipated consolidation activities within the weapons program.

A supplemental impact statement for LANL is currently underway, but Ordaz said that the new document was called for because of "changes in programmatic activities."

Ken Hargis, LANL's environmental stewardship division leader, described the lab's monitoring program that continually studies exposure risks at Area G from four defined pathways - inhalation, direct contact, water and food.

"The exposure is very small," he said.

Even the individual with the greatest risk of exposure receives only 1 percent of the radioactive dose that the same person receives from all background sources, including natural radon and cosmic radiation,



he noted.

Traces of radioactive tritium, plutonium, americium and cesium, while present in the Area G environment are only a fraction of DOE's acceptable dose standards, according to the lab's studies.

Exposure by all pathways, for example, based on composite information and projected from the beginning of the site in 1957 for 1,000 years would contribute 5.5 millirem per year out of a total of 100 millirem allowed by DOE.

The meeting, organized by Northern New Mexico Citizens Advisory Board, included a presentation by a representative of neighboring San Ildefonso Pueblo, who described the DOE landfill as an insult and a desecration of cultural resources.

Neil Webber, the pueblo's environmental director, was criticized at the meeting by former San Ildefonso Gov. Gilbert Sanchez for minimizing the pueblo's complaint.

Joni Arends, executive director of Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, asked the advisory board to recommend that DOE apply itself to protecting the Rio Grande.

"Stop burying waste in unlined pits, trenches and shafts at Area G," she demanded.

She also recommended an end to the current practice of storing vulnerable drums of transuranic waste in tents constructed with Tedlar, a polyvinyl fluoride film, calling for them to be replaced by Hardened On-Site Structures that could withstand a Boeing 747 crash.

Future conflicts between the laboratory and the NMED were foreshadowed, when hazardous waste chief James Bearzi vowed that the state would issue two draft permits under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act within the next nine months.

The permits would govern ongoing operations at the laboratory, including the storage of hazardous waste and closure requirements for contaminated sites like Area G.

He read a statement by NMED Secretary Ron Curry calling for more openness on issues related to Area G.

"I hope LANL uses this meeting to begin the process of 'raising the veil' on Area G and their future plans," Curry said in the statement.

Bearzi said the state's primary concern was a plume of tritium vapor that has been detected but not definitely

measured in the area below the low-waste dump.

Tritium, while having a relatively short half- life of about 12 years, is indicative of contaminant transport by water.

Both Bearzi and Rick Mayer, the Environmental Protection Administration's site officer at LANL, directly answered the advisory board's first question on whether there was contamination in the soil or water at Area G in the affirmative.

Mayer said current investigations, which include drilling 37 boreholes under the state's consent order would help define the tritium plume.

Concerning hazardous chemicals, he noted that no PCB's (Polychlorinated Biphenyls) have so far been discovered above detection limits in storm water runoff from Area G.

Midway through the meeting, activists in the audience quietly began holding up placards with anti-nuclear and anti-laboratory slogans.

Public comment included technical questions about contents of the waste, concerns about DOE's plans to "cap and monitor" existing pits and questions about the thousand-year standard for projecting environmental impact.

Lydia Clark of Santa Fe pointed out that a recent court ruling had said 10,000 years was inadequate in the case of the proposed Yucca Mountain nuclear depository.

Another speaker, who did not identify himself, complained that the forum had been an exercise in narrowing perceptions.

"They want us to look through the keyhole and not focus on the big picture," he said. "It's not only waste. That which produced it is also deadly."