

Los Alamos Study Group

Nuclear Disarmament • Environmental Protection • Social and Economic Justice

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For Immediate Release

“Citizen Scholars” Receive Grant to Provide Independent Review of Cleanup Priorities at Los Alamos

First priorities: stop nearly all disposal of additional radioactive waste in Los Alamos; minimize production of new radioactive waste, group says.

SANTA FE – Today the Los Alamos Study Group announced receipt of a \$50,000 grant to develop independent environmental and budget priorities for cleanup at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). The grant comes from a \$6 million fund created by the Department of Energy (DOE) in 1998 to settle the lawsuit brought by the Study Group and 38 other plaintiffs regarding the environmental impacts of DOE’s expanding nuclear weapons development and production programs.

LANL has hundreds of contaminated sites, including 24 radioactive and hazardous waste disposal areas containing more than 18 million cubic feet of radioactive waste. In addition, LANL continues to generate – *and permanently bury on site* – radioactive waste at an estimated rate of 335,000 cubic feet per year, enough to fill 45,000 55-gallon drums.¹ Some of the contaminated areas lie outside the Laboratory in Los Alamos County, in Santa Fe County, and within the borders of San Ildefonso Pueblo. Waste production and disposal at LANL are expected to grow along with nuclear weapons development and production, which have doubled in scale in the past six years, with further large expansions planned. DOE has provided for no less than *three* future radioactive waste disposal sites at LANL, once the current site (“Area G”) is filled. Area G contains a variety of wastes, including spent nuclear fuel, large amounts of transuranic waste, tritium, and solvents. Currently, radioactive waste is covered with as little as a three feet thickness of crushed tuff.

At present, there are no binding commitments to clean up any of these sites, making cleanup at Los Alamos a relatively low federal budget priority in comparison to other sites and to nuclear weapons programs here in New Mexico. The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED), which has had ample power under state and federal law to require cleanup since at least 1984, has chosen to pursue voluntary cleanup at Los Alamos, a practice which continues today.

In about 1990, DOE began a cleanup program in Los Alamos, and since then has funded that program with an aggregate of at least \$500 million. Actual cleanup, however, has been minimal by current industrial standards. Most of the money has been frittered away on overhead, “studies” that have little or no expectation of practical import, and the payment of excessive costs for routine activities. These wasteful practices, widely recognized within the environmental science and engineering community outside LANL, continue today, as does the continued large-scale disposal of radioactive waste.

The Study Group will use these grant monies to summarize the prior prioritizations made by DOE, LANL, and NMED, review the information available regarding each site, and independently

evaluate and rank each site for cleanup or stabilization, providing maps and user-friendly databases that can help interested parties become more effectively involved.

The Study Group has been following environmental management and cleanup activities at LANL since 1992 with staff, interns, and volunteers.

The study will be headed up by Greg Mello, Study Group Director. Greg is an engineer, regional planner, and former NMED staff member, with cleanup and enforcement experience both there and later, as a private consultant to industry.

The Study Group has retained the Santa Fe firm of Souder-Miller and Associates, which specializes in hydrology, soil science, and civil engineering, to do the bulk of the analysis, which will be posted on the Study Group's web site when it is completed.

The Study Group encourages citizen participation in this study, which could take a variety of forms depending upon skills and level of interest.

"While we can't yet say what we think ought to be cleaned up first, two things are obvious," said Mello. "First, it's important to stop adding to the problem, by the continued dumping of solid radioactive waste and the continued discharge of radioactive liquid. Second, there needs to be a thorough – and it will be painful – review of waste-generating activities, with an eye to minimizing the generation of waste."

"If you, as a citizen, are interested in these objectives, or in finding out more about the contaminated sites at Los Alamos, why not consider joining this project?" Mello added. "There is no reason that an interested citizen couldn't, in effect, 'adopt a dump' for more detailed review, or otherwise assist with this project. Why leave the cleanup for another generation?"

The Study Group telephone number is 982-7747.

Notes:

1. See DOE LANL Site Wide Environmental Impact Statement (SWEIS), Vol. II, Part I, Table I.1.1.3-1, p. I - 6. This is the estimate given in the SWEIS "No Action" alternative, reflecting current lab practices. See: <http://www.lasg.org/gfrm_a.html>.

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