

# Los Alamos Study Group

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**Press Advisory – Embargoed Until 1:00 pm Thursday, September 20**  
**Press Conference: Thursday, 1:00 pm, State Capitol Building, Santa Fe**

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## **1,000 Citizens Request Governor To Close Northern New Mexico Nuclear Dump**

### **Nuclear Waste Disposal Illegal Since 1985, Group Charges; Action Overdue**

SANTA FE – The first 1,000 cans of mock nuclear waste will be delivered tomorrow to Governor Johnson at the State Capitol in Santa Fe, each bearing a letter from a citizen asking the governor to close “Area G,” the largest nuclear waste disposal site in New Mexico.

Area G is located in Los Alamos County, about one mile west of White Rock, NM. It can be seen on the western skyline from any vantage point near Santa Fe, from El Dorado in the south to Truchas in the north.

The cans delivered today are the first of those collected in what the Study Group calls its “Can-paign” to end nuclear waste disposal in Northern New Mexico. Further deliveries are anticipated as the “Can-Paign” continues to heat up.

The cans – which contain a variety of food products – are labeled to look somewhat like nuclear waste drums. The letter on the label requests that Governor Johnson, once he has noted the names, addresses, and requests of the senders, donate the food to charities which serve the poor, since, as the letter says, “nuclear weapons have failed to create security in New Mexico.”

Each can was purchased by a citizen for \$3.00. The text of the letter on the can, images of the labels, a list of cooperating retail outlets, and maps and data regarding Area G can be found on the Study Group website, at <http://www.lasg.org>.

Area G is the permanent nuclear waste disposal site for Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). It can receive up to 45,000 drums’ worth of nuclear waste annually, although actual disposal rates are, for the time being at least, much less than this. The rate of waste generation and disposal is expected to increase, however, as LANL begins its planned production of plutonium “pits,” the cores of nuclear weapons, and as ambitious local nuclear weapons testing programs come on line. More than \$5 billion in new nuclear weapons facilities are being planned for LANL, many of which will create additional nuclear waste (*see* <http://www.lanl.gov/csp2000/>).

The regulatory history of Area G is one of near-complete neglect by the state of New Mexico.

In 1980, LANL began the application process for its existing and planned hazardous waste disposal sites on Mesita del Buey, including all of Area G, obtaining “interim status” for these sites. This allowed these sites to operate – for five years, as it turned out – without a permit. Then, in 1985, LANL “withdrew” interim status and declined to complete any permit application for the sites. Thus, neither Area G nor the other disposal sites at LANL were ever permitted. Nor have they been formally closed in accordance with Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) requirements, which are administered by the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED). There have never been any opportunities for public comment.

Under RCRA, hazardous waste disposal sites must either be fully permitted for operation

under legally-binding, agreed-upon guidelines, or else they must be formally closed. A central thrust of RCRA was, and is, to ensure that there is no third option.

Any closure plan for Area G must by law include a number of protections for citizens and the environment, including commitments to long-term monitoring, financial assurance, creation of an accurate waste inventory, and careful selection of closure options. Such options range from long-term containment in place to removal of some or all of the waste. The selection of remedies requires public participation, and the Governor is thus bound to consider carefully the requests delivered today and to keep the senders apprized of the required closure hearings.

Area G began receiving waste in 1957, and has so far accumulated some 11 million cubic feet of toxic and radioactive waste in permanent disposal, much more waste than the total capacity of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) near Carlsbad, NM. Waste at Area G is now, as in the past, buried in shallow unlined pits and shafts, and is finally covered by about three feet of crushed volcanic tuff, a sand-like material. Most of the waste has little or no primary containment, and there is no further containment, cap, or liner. Beneath the surface, plumes of toxic gases and radioactive tritium cover much of the site. Permanent springs and surface water are located immediately adjacent – and below – the site, in Pajarito Canyon.

Historically, Area G has received wastes of all types, including a wide range of toxic chemicals, pesticides, transuranic (TRU) wastes of the kind now destined for WIPP, spent nuclear fuel and entire small nuclear reactors, and other radioactive wastes of every description. Both liquids and solids were disposed at the site. The intentional disposal of chemical wastes at Area G allegedly ceased in 1985, although the Study Group believes that it is possible, even likely, that inadvertent disposal of regulated hazardous waste continues to the present day. No external agency is monitoring the waste disposed at the site, nor is the waste fully analyzed or characterized prior to disposal.

Beginning in the 1970s, TRU waste – waste containing higher concentrations of plutonium and other transuranic elements – was segregated from the waste intended for burial. This TRU waste was stored, at first underground and now in tents above ground, for future shipment to WIPP. So Area G now stores, in addition to the waste permanently disposed, some 60,000 drums' worth of TRU waste. The Department of Energy (DOE) hopes to ship this waste to WIPP, along with ever-increasing amounts of newly-generated TRU waste, over the next three decades.

In 1994, DOE estimated that waste at Los Alamos contained about 610 kilograms of plutonium. Most of this is at Area G. The fraction of this plutonium that is permanently buried is unknown, since early LANL and DOE disposal records are sketchy, but is likely that hundreds of kilograms are buried, making Area G a sort of unpermitted "WIPP site," – albeit one with markedly fewer natural advantages than the troubled Carlsbad facility, and no external regulation whatsoever.

"It is time that LANL joined the 21<sup>st</sup> century, obeyed the law, and closed this site," said Study Group Director Greg Mello. "There simply is no other option. Quite apart from law, the University of California, which has made a fortune developing, producing, and promoting weapons of mass destruction at this laboratory, has a moral duty to stop polluting New Mexico. Using euphemisms like 'waste management' does not make such violation any more acceptable."

"It is possible that any extension or re-issuance of LANL's operating permit under RCRA could be illegal if it does not include prompt and formal closure of Area G, with all the protections for the New Mexico environment that implies."

"There is no perfect answer to the question of what to do with the waste Los Alamos keeps generating. Making less of it is certainly possible. But under no circumstances should dumping the waste in shallow unlined pits above our drinking water supplies be among the answers we ought to consider."