

Press Advisory June 23, 2003

Public to Gather Thursday at Capitol, Present Petitions Requesting Closure, Hearings, for Unlicensed Los Alamos Nuke Dump

RELATIONSHIP OF DISPOSAL PLANS TO GROWING WEAPONS PROGRAM QUESTIONED

Press Conference at State Capitol Rotunda, 10:00 am

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SANTA FE – At 10:00 am on Thursday of this week at the State Capitol, citizens will formally petition Governor Richardson to close the unlicensed “Area G” nuclear and chemical waste landfill at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) and ask him to start the required public hearing process to examine alternatives for what to do with the waste buried there.

Also on the table is what to do with the waste the lab expects to generate and dispose at this and successor Los Alamos dumps over the next seven decades (*see* “How Much Waste Does DOE Plan to Dispose at LANL?”, at www.lasg.org; also look there for prior disposal).

Closely related to waste generation and disposal, both in fact and also in law, is the question of nuclear weapons design and production. The University of California (UC), the Department of Energy (DOE), and the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) are all asserting in current litigation against our state that New Mexico has no power to regulate any hazardous waste or contamination containing radioactive residues from any nuclear weapons program. Our very-public Governor has remained silent on this major litigation, which challenges his administration’s ability to protect the environment.

Given this challenge to the state’s regulatory authority, on Thursday we will ask, “What does the Governor think, then, about proposals to build a factory for the production of plutonium “pits” in New Mexico – much of the waste from which New Mexico might not be able to regulate, although it would be buried here? Will the Governor or his representatives speak to these issues?”

Study Group director Mello: “The answers to these questions, which lie just below the surface of the Area G issue like so many drums of nuclear waste, are not just important to New Mexicans. Given our Governor’s visible role in the Democratic Party, they are important to the country as a whole. Does he approve of producing weapons of mass destruction here, or anywhere for that matter? What does he think about the push to resume nuclear weapons design and production? The Bush nuclear agenda, if consummated, will certainly affect New Mexico deeply – even though most of the waste would be buried *shallowly*, above our water supply. What role does he see for weapons of mass destruction, with their attendant waste, in New Mexico’s economy, polity, and society? In most states, this is not a salient issue. Here, it is.”

On Thursday, more than 1,500 cans of food dressed up as “waste drums,” each bearing a letter to the Governor, will be delivered to him in the final phase of what has been dubbed the “Can-Paign” to close this nuclear dump. Previous deliveries during the Johnson Administration have totaled more than 2,000 cans. The food cans will be donated to the Santa Fe Food Depot.

Why cans of food? Mello again: “As Dorothy Day once said, ‘Peace begins when the hungry are fed.’ In New Mexico, the national security enterprise, which for a decade and a half has delivered to our state more money per capita than people receive in any other state, has failed miserably to provide basic economic security to almost one-fourth of all New Mexicans. The cans of food symbolize the injustice of these federal priorities, which our state has always supported and promoted – we believe, to its long-term detriment of its citizens and its environment.”

Most petitioners have paid \$3 to deliver their letter on one of these cans, lending more weight – literally – to their petition. A database of signers will also be provided to the governor’s office, to supplement those already provided in 2001 and 2002. In the organizational wing of the campaign, some 27 environmental organizations have petitioned the governor’s office to close the dump, in January of 2002. Prior to this, the Attorney General’s office wrote the NMED, requesting closure of Area G, pointing out that disposal there has been illegal since 1985.

It is possible that no other current hazardous waste permitting and enforcement issue in New Mexico has raised wider public and organizational concern than Area G – a tribute to the involvement of the dozens of volunteers who have canvassed in the “Can-Paign. To them, Thursday’s presentation is a milestone of success. Mello: “Clearly the public is now visibly concerned, and any draft hazardous waste permit for LANL – perennially expected from NMED, as LANL’s operating permit expired years ago – *must* now address Area G closure. The volunteers have done their job – now it is up to the Governor and NMED to do theirs.”

The press conference and petitioning ceremony, to which both the public and NMED Secretary Ron Curry have been invited, will begin at 10:00 am, starting with a brief overview of the situation to date. Gilbert Sanchez, a former lieutenant governor from San Ildefonso Pueblo, whose sacred land abuts the dump, will speak on the religious and cultural significance of the site, not doubt making sure none of us fall into the error of equating environmental protection with protecting public health, an important subset of the problem. Young people, some of whom participated in the “Can-Paign,” will be on hand, presenting background information on the nuclear weapons stockpile, in a dramatic visualization.

Models will help us visualize the large and otherwise rather abstract quantities of waste involved – quantities which already exceed those expected to be buried at the WIPP site near Carlsbad. Over the next 70 years, LANL expects to bury on site almost as much waste as it has up to now, raising questions about the nature and direction of the “cleanup” now underway.

Other topics addressed will include alternatives to uncontained burial, closure options for Area G and related sites, and regulatory measures short of full closure that would better protect the environment. There will be ample time for questions.

So far, response from New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) and the Governor’s office has been effectively nil and nil, respectively. What is it about this particular facility – LANL – which has made it uniquely non-compliant among large New Mexico industrial facilities not just recently but for the past two decades? Why not ask this and other questions on Thursday? The public, at least, is ready.

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