State of New Mexico
ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT
Office of the Secretary
Harold Runnels Building
1190 St. Francis Drive, P.O. Box 26110
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87502-6110
Telephone (505) 827-2855
Fax (505) 827-2836

BILL RICHARDSON
GOVERNOR

RON CURRY
SECRETARY

DERRITH WATCHMAN-MOORE
DEPUTY SECRETARY

February 17, 2006
Immediate Release

Contact: Adam Rankin, NMED Communications Director
Phone: (505) 827-0314

Environment Department to Host Public Meeting on Plan to Investigate Groundwater Contamination at Helena Chemical Co. in Mesquite

(Santa Fe, NM) — The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) will hold a public meeting on plans to investigate groundwater contamination at Mesquite's Helena Chemical Co. facility, south of Las Cruces. The Department approved Helena's Stage 1 Abatement Plan investigation report of Sept. 15, 2005, and an addendum report of Oct. 20, 2005, with requirements for additional assessment work.

The meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, February 21, from 6-7 p.m. at the Mesquite Fire Station.

NMED staff will explain the Department's regulatory authority, the process for investigating groundwater contamination and abatement, the investigation's results, and how the public can participate.

"Helena has a responsibility for determining the extent of groundwater contamination at its facility," NMED Secretary Ron Curry said. "Groundwater, which provides 90 percent of the drinking water in the state, is our most important resource, and we need to protect it for the health and safety of our communities."

Helena's abatement plan was approved by NMED with additional conditions on May 27, 2005. The subsequent investigation included the identification of supply wells within a mile of the site; the performance of a geophysical survey on the southern portion of the site; the characterization of subsurface geology; the installation of additional monitoring wells; and the sampling of soil, surface water, and groundwater.

The report identified 130 domestic wells within one mile of the Helena site, two commercial wells, 33 irrigation wells, two dairy wells, four community wells and eight other unidentified wells. The closest wells are approximately 600 feet to the south of the Helena facility, but are separated by the Del Rio Drainage Ditch, a county road, and a cotton field.

The geophysical survey for possible buried tanks or wastes uncovered a few anomalies, but discovered no buried tanks or wastes. Soil sampling results indicate that concentrations of iron and manganese were above NMED soil screening guidelines, established to protect groundwater. There were some areas with high nitrate concentrations in shallow (1-3 feet deep) soil samples collected on the northern portion of the site, ranging from 17 milligrams per kilogram (mg/kg) to 1,200 mg/kg; the concentrations tended to decrease with depth. The higher concentrations may pose a threat for groundwater contamination.

Nine monitoring wells were installed at or near the site, including an upgradient well installed north of the site to serve as a comparison for background levels. Well samples were analyzed for nitrate, ammonia, total nitrogen, major ions, pesticides, herbicides, and metals. Results indicate that several inorganic contaminants (boron, chloride, fluoride, iron, manganese, nitrate, sulfate, and total dissolved solids) were detected above state standards in several monitoring wells, including the upgradient background well. Two herbicides were detected, but the concentrations were below drinking water standards. Nitrate was not detected in the upgradient well, but was discovered above state groundwater standards in several monitoring wells, one of which is less than 800 feet from two Mesquite community wells.

Surface water tests from the Del Rio ditch show that iron and manganese were above state standards, but all other contaminants, including nitrate, were below state standards. Helena will be required to clean up or abate contaminants found to be originating from their facility.

For more information, contact Adam Rankin, NMED Communications Director, at (505) 827-0314.

###