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Environment Department Finds Pumping Impacts on LANL Contaminants; Further Evidence of Need for Comprehensive Lab Clean Up

(Santa Fe, NM) — Recent water quality testing and analysis by the New Mexico Environment Department's (NMED) Department of Energy (DOE) Oversight Bureau indicates that municipal water well pumping is impacting contaminated ground water beneath Los Alamos National Laboratory. A report released today by the bureau includes findings that the pumping of Los Alamos County municipal drinking water wells in the Mortandad Canyon area is influencing movement or potentially capturing contamination already present in the regional or drinking-water aquifer. This finding, although not currently a health concern, provides further evidence of LANL's impacts on the deep ground water supplies that the lab and nearby communities rely on for drinking water.

Ground water in the Mortandad Canyon area is contaminated with tritium, perchlorate, chloride, and nitrate at levels below U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) drinking water standards. For example, monitoring from a deep aquifer well in Mortandad Canyon has shown tritium levels of 18 picocuries per liter (pCi/L) and perchlorate levels of six parts per billion (ppb). The EPA drinking water standard for tritium is 20,000 pCi/L. EPA does not currently have a health standard for perchlorate. The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection recommends a maximum contaminant level of 18 ppb for perchlorate in public water supplies.

While these results are low, they have increased over time, indicating that more concentrated plumes of contamination in the higher ground water zones (including a perchlorate plume of 180 ppb in the perched aquifer) may have implications for the drinking-water aquifer beneath Mortandad Canyon. Water levels in one contaminated monitoring well also fluctuates in concert with the pumping of water-supply wells, showing a connection between contamination and the drinking-water supply.

"We do not want these findings to unduly alarm citizens in Los Alamos and White Rock. Their drinking water is regularly tested and it is safe," said NMED Secretary Ron Curry. "However, it's these sorts of findings that make the investigation and clean up required under NMED's Corrective Action Order so important. This order will allow us to understand and act on this pollution before it threatens public health. These issues also show why it is so important for the next LANL contractor to have proven environmental expertise."

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On March 1, NMED, DOE and the University of California signed a fence-to-fence Order on Consent designed to clean up six decades of pollution at LANL. This enforceable document specifies investigation and clean up requirements and contains strict deadlines. Under the order, the entire lab site is set to be remediated by 2015.

LANL, through industrial operations beginning in the 1950's through the early 2000's, discharged wastewater into canyons and the shallow aquifer with tritium levels in the millions of pCi/L and perchlorate in the hundreds if not thousands of ppb. These shallow aquifers recharge intermediate aquifers as well as provide recharge to the regional drinking water aquifer.

“I would like to commend both Directors Nanos and Kuckuck for their efforts to build a better working relationship with this department,” said Secretary Curry. “NMED is committed to being as transparent as possible and to sharing any information we have with the public as soon as it becomes available. This report again shows how important the independent oversight functions of the DOE Oversight Bureau are to DOE, NMED and all the people of New Mexico.”

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