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

BILL RICHARDSON
GOVERNOR

RON CURRY
SECRETARY

CINDY PADILLA
DEPUTY SECRETARY

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Contact: Marissa Stone, NMED Communications Director
Telephone: (505) 827-0314 or (505) 231-0475

Environment Department Issues Requirements for LANL Groundwater Monitoring

(Santa Fe, NM) – The New Mexico Environment Department issued requirements to Los Alamos National Laboratory today detailing needed improvements for the lab's groundwater monitoring network. Deficiencies in the network are impeding the LANL's ability to detect contamination from polluted sites at the lab.

"This system is supposed to be the backbone of enforceable cleanup of the lab and a sentry system to alert local residents of contamination issues," said NMED Secretary Ron Curry. "That system – which has improperly drilled and constructed wells – fails both missions too often. Improvements are necessary so lab officials, state regulators and residents will have the best, most useful information available on groundwater pollution at LANL."

NMED's concerns about the lab's system result from well-documented problems LANL has experienced in the placement, drilling, construction, development and sampling of its wells. The department's dissatisfaction with LANL's pace in addressing these issues also compelled NMED to impose the requirements.

Accurate groundwater monitoring is crucial to protection of the regional aquifer (the sole water supply for LANL and the towns of Los Alamos and White Rock) and to the remedy selection process for the larger waste sites LANL must clean up to stay in compliance with the order.

NMED's requirement included abandonment of portions of damaged or defective wells in key locations and the rapid assessment of the lab's groundwater monitoring capabilities in areas where remedy and closure activities are imminent. That includes Area G in TA-54, where the lab still disposes of low-level radioactive waste. NMED requires LANL to aggressively address the monitoring problems at three crucial areas: TA-54 (LANL's main waste management area), TA-50 (one of LANL's main waste treatment areas), and the Los Alamos Canyon area, which includes TA-21. Plutonium manufacturing was conducted at TA-21 in the 1950s. At TA-54, LANL has only five wells to monitor regional groundwater. Three of those wells are damaged to the point where NMED is requiring LANL to minimize their use and install a replacement well. The requirements also call for immediate replacement of R-25, a regional aquifer monitoring well at TA-16 that, although damaged, has detected explosive compounds in groundwater.

For more information contact Marissa Stone, NMED Communications Director, at (505) 827-0314 or (505) 231-0475.

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