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Environment Department Suspects Unauthorized Dumping in Rio Ruidoso; Water Quality Investigation Continues, No Water-Borne Illness Detected

(Santa Fe, NM) — Preliminary results from an exhaustive multidisciplinary investigation by the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) suggest an unauthorized dumping was likely responsible for recent abrupt and localized changes in water quality in the Rio Ruidoso.

"Water is our most important natural resource in New Mexico and we take all reports of dumping seriously," NMED Secretary Ron Curry said. "We all must be vigilant about preserving water quality and I applaud the citizens of San Patricio and the Rio Ruidoso valley for bringing their concerns to our attention. I encourage all New Mexicans to become more active in improving their watershed's health and function, especially in this time of drought that only serves to exacerbate water quality problems."

Evidence gathered by NMED investigators indicates the change in water quality was unnatural and contributed to an extensive and clearly demarcated algal die off, suggesting a one-time or intermittent discharge. A contamination source is still undetermined, though some analyses that could determine a source are still incomplete.

NMED and DOH launched an intensive field investigation in February into reports of environmental health concerns in the San Patricio community of Lincoln County, about 20 miles east of Ruidoso when several area residents reported symptoms after coming in contact with water in the Rio Ruidoso, which runs through the community.

"It is often difficult to determine the source of pollution in cases like this and whether it was an illegal act," NMED Secretary Ron Curry said. "The most important thing is that no one was sickened by this unfortunate situation. Whenever there is a potential environmental threat to public health it is essential we take action and respond swiftly, as we did in this case."

During a sweep of New Mexico Department of Health (DOH) records and interviews with area residents, no evidence of water-borne human illness was found. Carrizo Creek, Rio Bonito, and Rio Hondo do not meet secondary standards for contact due to high bacteria levels unrelated to the algal die off, so NMED recommends against swimming or allowing children to play in these waters.

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4/25/06
Environment Department Suspects Unauthorized Dumping in Rio Ruidoso

The cause for the change in water quality has not been identified, and laboratory analyses of metal concentrations, which could suggest a possible contamination source, are still pending. Pollution responsible for the algal die off appears to have been introduced downstream from the Highway-70 bridge and upstream of the Ruidoso/Ruidoso Downs wastewater treatment plant effluent outfall. Area residents reported that the river water sometimes had a blue, green or gray color, and an odor similar to that of burning wire. Those reports suggest possible contamination by copper sulfate, a common algaecide. Pending metal analyses should determine whether copper sulfate is a potential source for the die off and water quality change.

An electro-shock fish survey found rainbow trout, brown trout and long-nose dace present near the Highway-70 bridge. All individuals appeared healthy with no obvious signs of disease. Rio Grande chubs, white suckers and brown trout were found near San Patricio, all apparently healthy, though the survey found fewer brown trout than expected, given the habitat type.

In addition to extensive surface water and fish sampling, 52 private water supply wells were sampled during the investigation and tested for chemical and microbiological components. While some constituents registered elevated concentrations, the results indicate groundwater quality has varied little since 1997, when NMED previously tested wells in the area.

Groundwater sulfate levels were found to be above the recommended limit of 250 milligrams per liter (mg/L) for potable water, but were at similar levels in 1997. Iron concentrations ranged from non-detect to 1.66 mg/L, with 11 samples exceeding the recommended limit of 0.3mg/L. These natural minerals can cause aesthetic problems, such as poor taste and smell, but do not pose a hazard to public health.

A final report on the investigation will be prepared and posted on NMED's Web site, www.nmenv.state.nm.us, once all the data and analyses are complete. To report an unauthorized discharge call toll free (866) 428-6535; for emergencies call (505) 827-9329. For more information on watershed protection and how to be involved visit http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/swqb/WPS/index.html, or contact Adam Rankin, NMED Communications Director, at (505) 827-0314.

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