

March 19, 2008

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Donald L. Winchell, Jr.
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Department of Energy – Los Alamos Site Office
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RE: LANL Participation in New Mexico Preparedness Area 3 Exercise

Dear Dr. Anastasio and Mr. Winchell:

I am sending this letter to express grave concerns over recent statements by Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) staff concerning a multiyear emergency preparedness and response exercise coordinated by the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED). This exercise is extremely important to ensure that northern New Mexico emergency planners are prepared to protect their communities and provide timely and accurate information to the public in the event of a catastrophic emergency in the planning area. NMED has been coordinating this emergency preparedness exercise since mid-2006. Participants include LANL staff, emergency managers from four counties, eight Northern Pueblos, and the Jicarilla Apache Nation, as well as representatives from surrounding hospitals, school systems, community groups, media outlets, and various state agencies.

The Core Planning Team for this exercise – emergency managers from LANL, NMED, the New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH), and the New Mexico Department of Public Safety (NMDPS) – created a scenario that included a “radiological release to the atmosphere from an accidental detonation of un-surveyed underground explosives by excavation contractors at the Los Alamos National Laboratory’s Material Disposal Area B” at a meeting in January 2007. This scenario was further discussed at subsequent planning meetings and workshops held throughout 2007. The first phase of this initiative, a tabletop exercise of warning and emergency public information systems (a major issue during the Cerro Grande fire), is scheduled for April 15, 2008.

Recently, after 1½ years of planning, LANL representatives complained to NMED that the scenario was “unrealistic” and threatened to withdraw from the exercise. NMED nevertheless sought to keep LANL involved and the exercise on schedule by initiating several discussions with LANL personnel to reach a compromise. An alternative scenario proposed by LANL – a fire at the LANL Tritium Facility – was presented at a March 4th meeting of the exercise planning group.

Predictably, other members of the planning group expressed considerable dismay over this last minute change. After the meeting, representatives of Embudo Valley Environmental Monitoring Group and Los Alamos County sent correspondence to NMED articulating their concerns, including the lack of open involvement in the choosing of the new scenario, and incredulity that

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LANL would seek these changes after 18 months of planning had gone into the original scenario, planning that LANL was involved with every step of the way. Moreover, LANL's recently proposed scenarios were based on releases within the "fenceline" of the Laboratory, thus allowing LANL to maintain an inordinate amount of control over the response actions in the exercise.

In the case of a release from LANL's tritium facility, LANL control of response actions could perhaps be justified. However, during the Cerro Grande Fire LANL's first response was to "lock the gates", retreat to its own emergency operations center, and conduct very little communication with the outside world, at least for the first few days of the emergency. Such a response puts the health and welfare of New Mexicans unnecessarily at risk. The use of a scenario at MDA B is therefore crucial to testing interagency response and public communication capabilities.

NMED therefore intends to continue forward with the originally planned scenario as agreed to by all participants. This exercise will help build relationships and support within the emergency management community as well as with stakeholders that are critical players during an emergency. My hope is that LANL will see clear to continue its involvement in this exercise. I'm sure you agree that this exercise is vitally important to protecting the communities NMED serves – the same communities that sustain LANL.

We can only hope that the lab staff is correct and that a "radiological release to the atmosphere from an accidental detonation" at the lab is "unrealistic", in that we all hope it will never occur. However, prudent emergency planning dictates that we must prepare for the worst case scenario so that we are ready when a catastrophe strikes. If you have any further questions on this issue, please contact NMED Hazardous Waste Bureau Chief James Bearzi at 505-476-6016.

Sincerely,

Ron Curry
Cabinet Secretary

cc: James Bearzi, HWB
Area 3 Exercise Team Members