NEW MEXICO
ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT

Office of the Secretary

Harold Runnels Building
1190 Saint Francis Drive (87505)
PO Box 26110, Santa Fe, NM 87502
Phone (505) 827-2855 Fax (505) 827-2836
www.nmenv.state.nm.us

Bill Richardson
Governor

Ron Curry
Secretary
Jon Goldstein
Deputy Secretary

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

Environment Department Takes Enforcement Action against Los Alamos National Laboratory for Faulty Well

Improperly Completed Well Leaking Contamination into Aquifer

(Santa Fe, NM) — The New Mexico Environment Department issued a Notice of Violation and a proposed penalty of $1.87 million today to the U.S. Department of Energy and Los Alamos National Security, L.L.C., for failing to plug and abandon a groundwater monitoring well that is leaking contamination downward in the direction of the drinking water aquifer at LANL. The lab's failure to abandon that well in a timely and proper fashion is a violation of the 2005 fence-to-fence clean up order, which specifies requirements for cleanup of the Lab's environmental pollution.

This action marks the fifth major violation by the operators of LANL of the order that has resulted in enforcement by NMED.

"One of NMED's most important jobs is protecting the quality of the water we drink," said New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry. "While local water supplies are regularly tested and are safe, I'm troubled with the lab's failure to comply with the department's directives. Those directives include protecting the regional aquifer from this leaking well."

Under the Consent Order, LANL submitted a work plan to plug and abandon well MCOBT-4.4 on Oct. 31, 2007 to prevent contaminated groundwater from leaking into the aquifer. NMED approved the work plan on Dec. 7, 2007 and required that the work be properly completed by June 30, 2008. DOE and LANS subsequently notified NMED that "resource limitations" prohibited them from complying with NMED's directive and protecting the drinking water aquifer from the leaky well. To date, LANL has not completed this work.

Well MCOBT-4.4, located in Mortandad Canyon, is potentially allowing contaminated groundwater to seep from higher alluvial aquifers in the direction of the deeper regional aquifer that the towns of Los Alamos and White Rock use for all of their drinking water supplies. The well is known to have elevated levels of chromium, perchlorate, nitrate and tritium. Nearby drinking water production wells PM-5, PM-4 and O-4 do not have detectable levels of contamination, although they are located only 0.4, 0.8, and 1.0 miles, respectively, from MCOBT-4.4. LANL has yet to commence work to correct the leaking well.

The types of contaminants found in the well are known to have been used in historical lab operations. Chromium is known to cause kidney and liver damage in humans who drink contaminated water and can cause cancer. Perchlorate can affect thyroid function and hence the body's ability to regulate metabolism and growth. Drinking water contaminated with perchlorate is of particular concern to pregnant women and their fetuses. It can result in delayed development and decreased learning capability.

The order requires the lab to comply with all NMED approved documents and complete corrective actions for releases of contaminants into groundwater. The order became effective in March 2005. The violation contains the proposed penalty of $1,871,100 and an offer to the lab of entering into settlement discussions with NMED. The maximum penalty NMED could fine the lab for the violation is nearly $7 million.

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

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