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Environment Department Rules Milky Rain in Southwestern New Mexico Last Month Did Not Pose Threat to Residents

Test Results of Rainwater Samples Show Low Levels of Heavy Metals

(Santa Fe, NM) – The New Mexico Environment Department reviewed test results from samples of milky-looking rain that fell in areas of Grant County last month and determined the event did not pose a significant health concern.

Results from three samples of rain that fell Jan. 7 in areas from Silver City to the Gila Cliff Dwellings — based on preliminary data — showed that most heavy metals were not detected or were found at levels below concern.

“We received many calls from residents who were alarmed by this strange rainfall,” said New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry. “This was an isolated event and we want to reassure residents that they should not be concerned about the effects of the rain.”

NMED does not regulate rainwater and does not have information for appropriate levels of contaminants in rain. However, NMED monitors surface water and staff collected three rainwater samples in mid-January in response to the concerns. NMED shipped those samples to the State’s Scientific Laboratory Division for analysis.

NMED staff compared metal results from historic data collected in the early 1990s by NMED’s Surface Water Bureau from playa lakes near Lordsburg to the recent milky rain event and found similar chemical signatures of metals. That comparison strengthens the suspicion that strong winds may have suspended sediment from upwind playa basins that could have mixed with precipitation and created the milky rain. However, regardless of the source, the metals measured from the samples were in a form and concentration that pose a minimal risk to the public.

Additional samples were submitted to the University at Texas El Paso and New Mexico Institute of Technology for analysis. Those results have not been reported to NMED.

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