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**Environment Department Issues Findings of Comprehensive Water Quality Assessment
of Pajarito Plateau Watersheds in Northern New Mexico, Seeks Public Comment**

Study Shows Water Quality in Plateau Exceeds Standards for PCBS, Adjusted Gross Alpha, Selenium, Aluminum and other Metals

(Santa Fe, N.M.) The New Mexico Environment Department – with significant data from Los Alamos National Laboratory – performed a comprehensive assessment of watersheds in the Pajarito Plateau in Northern New Mexico indicating those waters exceeded state standards for polychlorinated byphenyls, adjusted gross alpha, aluminum and other metals.

The study, which was primarily focused on storm water samples collected between 2004 and 2008, represents the largest single surface water quality assessment conducted by NMED.

“I commend our Surface Water Quality and Department of Energy Oversight bureaus for their years of work that made this study possible,” said New Mexico Environment Department Water and Waste Management Division Director Marcy Leavitt. “We are concerned that waters in these areas exceed state standards designed to protect human health and wildlife. We must continue to do more to address those concerns.”

The Pajarito Plateau is located on the eastern slope of the Jemez Mountains and includes watersheds that drain through the Los Alamos area to the Rio Grande. The assessment included more than 29,000 data values from 78 stations around the plateau. The study is included as part of the department’s draft 2010-2012 Integrated List that indicates whether waters are meeting designated uses for New Mexico’s water quality standards. Those uses include domestic and public water supplies, irrigation, aquatic life, wildlife habitat and human health. The study does not focus on the origins of the impairments.

The department used all readily available surface water quality data collected during 2004-2008 from watershed stations throughout the Pajarito Plateau for the assessment (See link for a map of the stations <http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/SWQB/303d-305b/2010-2012/Pajarito/index.html>)

“We appreciate LANL’s data collection and compilation contribution to this project,” Leavitt said. The water quality assessment included data collected by NMED’s Surface Water Quality Bureau and Department of Energy Oversight bureaus, and LANL. The SWQB dataset, which was collected as part of a special study of the Pajarito Plateau in 2006 and 2007, was funded by the U.S. EPA.

The results of the assessment largely confirmed, with much greater detail, the water quality impairments identified by the department during a prior Pajarito Plateau assessment conducted in 2006. Primary findings of the new assessment include:

- **PCBs** – Available data exceed the human health criterion of 0.00064 µg/L in storm water throughout most of the study area where sufficient data were available, and exceed the Wildlife Habitat criterion of 0.014 µg/L primarily in Pajarito, Los Alamos, Pueblo, Sandia and their associated side canyons.
- **Adjusted Gross Alpha** – New Mexico has a 15 pCi/L livestock watering criterion for “adjusted gross alpha” which means the total radioactivity due to alpha particle emission excluding radon-222, uranium and source, special nuclear and by-product material as defined by the Atomic Energy Act of 1954. Even after adjusting for special nuclear materials and other excluded nuclides when possible, the 15 pCi/L criterion was exceeded nearly everywhere sufficient data were available within the study area.
- **Selenium** – Assessment of available data resulted in delisting all of the AUs previously listed for selenium, presumably because the previous listing were based on elevated concentrations of selenium following the 2000 Cerro Grande fire.
- **Aluminum** – By far, the largest metal impairment identified was exceedences of the acute aluminum standard of 750 µg/L. The large number of exceedences may reflect natural sources associated with the geology of the region; for example, there are also many aluminum listing in other areas of the Jemez mountains.
- **Other metals** – There were 14 stream reaches (assessment units) listed for exceedences of the acute copper criteria, 6 for mercury, and 4 for acute zinc. These are primarily located in Pajarito, Los Alamos, Pueblo, Sandia and their associated side canyons.

The draft 2010-2012 Integrated List is now open for a 60-day public comment period that closes Feb. 16, 2010. The public is invited to review the data and assessment conclusions and provide comment.

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