

Inclusive Coalition Addresses Toxics & Drinking Water

Los Alamos National Laboratory, or LANL, is a United States Department of Energy (DOE) national laboratory, managed and operated by Los Alamos National Security, LLC, a private corporation, and located in Los Alamos, New Mexico. LANL is located on the Pajarito Plateau, between the Jemez Mountains to the west and the Rio Grande to the east. The Jemez Mountains are the ancestral Homelands of Pueblo Peoples. During the twelfth century, people slowly migrated to their present

locations along the Rio Grande. Northern New Mexico is also home to many tribes, including the Pueblos of San Ildefonso, Cochiti, Jemez and Santa Clara and to a large Hispanic population. The laboratory is one of the largest science and technology institutions in the world and conducts multidisciplinary research for fields such as national security, outer space, renewable energy, medicine, nanotechnology and supercomputing. The laboratory was founded during World War II as a secret, centralized facility to coordinate the scientific research of the Manhattan Project, the Allied project to develop the first nuclear weapons. Because LANL continues operations as a research and development facility for nuclear weapons, radioactive, toxic and hazardous contaminants of all sorts are discharged through outfalls to the canyons and legacy wastes travel in stormwater

“Our existence was for millennium in this place... Santa Clara Pueblo, in which I reside and am a tribal member, is only three air miles from the Los Alamos National Laboratory. In the short 67 years of LANL’s existence, the nuclear industry has disrupted our spiritual connection, ecological environment, and has tainted the Rio Grande, the life blood water way for New Mexicans.”

— Marian Naranjo, Executive Director Honor Our Pueblo Existence and Communities for Clean Water member

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“Since 1990, the minority population in potentially affected counties surrounding LANL grew by about 33% (from 49.3% in 1990 to 54.4% in 2000) of the total population in the potentially affected counties.”

— Final Site-wide Environmental Impact Statement for Continued Operations of LANL, DOE/EIS-0380, May 2008

toward the Rio Grande. The formation of an active coalition of non-governmental organizations located on tribal lands, watershed conservationists and concerned citizens has raised the specter of concern for the land, water, air and peoples of the region.

BACKGROUND

After the catastrophic Cerro Grande fire in 2000, the activist watchdog group Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety (CCNS) became alarmed about the transport of toxic materials off the LANL site into the Rio Grande watershed. CCNS organized a conference that summer that drew more than 450 participants. Amigos

canyons below the lab. Using LANL data and their own independent hydrologist, CCW has also shown that fast-moving toxins can reach the river through springs within 26 years. Using LANL data, well-drilling experts have shown that LANL’s well monitoring program is fatally flawed and cannot provide reliable data on the scope of toxic pollution of the regional drinking water aquifer — a claim supported by a 2007 National Academy of Sciences report.

LANL’S TOXIC LEGACY

CCW has repeatedly brought these concerns to LANL management, the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED),



Rio Grande valley.

INDEPENDENT ANALYSIS

For the past six years, Communities for Clean Water has documented and publicized the presence of PCBs, chromium, radionuclides, perchlorates and other toxics in LANL’s canyons, the Rio Grande watershed, and the regional drinking water aquifer. CCW has shown conclusively that stormwater runoff is carrying toxins into the



CCW’s Marian Naranjo participating in water sampling.

“As a percentage of the total resident population in 2000, New Mexico had the largest percentage minority population (55%) among the contiguous states and the second largest percentage minority population among all states (only Hawaii had a larger percentage minority population [77%])”

— Final Site-wide Environmental Impact Statement for Continued Operations of LANL, DOE/EIS-0380, May 2008

“do not eat” fish advisory for White Rock Canyon, below LANL on the Rio Grande. Chromium-6 (or hexavalent chromium) is in the regional aquifer supplying Los Alamos County at 16 times the New Mexico groundwater protection standard. Plutonium has been detected in the Buckman well field, the source of 40% of Santa Fe’s drinking water.

ACCOUNTABILITY

In order to hold LANL accountable, Communities for Clean Water is focusing on two major campaigns. The first is a Clean Water Act lawsuit against the DOE for stormwater violations at LANL, which includes the CCW organizations and two members of the Pueblo de San Ildefonso. CCW’s other focus is an outreach campaign directed at impacted communities, the media and public officials.

CCW has also taken advantage of several ground and surface water permits — especially the lab’s first-ever Individual Stormwater Permit — to press for assurances that no additional pollutants are discharged; to advocate for cleanup of



Sheri Kotowski (CCW) does water sampling of the Rio Grande.

the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Energy (DOE), the National Nuclear Security Administration and other governmental agencies. Despite these efforts, and a Consent Order signed by LANL with the State of New Mexico mandating clean up of toxic waste sites by 2015, the full impact of LANL’s toxic legacy may only just be beginning to be felt. Hundreds of unlined pits, trenches and shafts containing toxics remain unmonitored. PCB contamination in soils at LANL is as high as 38,000 times the standard for human health; the state issued a first-ever

historic spills; to educate and mobilize the public around the impact of LANL’s toxic legacy; and to get more information from LANL into the public record while continuing to press for independent analyses of all relevant issues.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

CCW and the Clean Water Act legal process have raised awareness with the public, media and elected officials about toxic discharges from LANL and the need to increase environmental cleanup and restoration funding at LANL because of both environmental and public health concerns.


Through Marian Naranjo, there has been dialogue and information-sharing with not only the Pueblo nations surrounding LANL, but all 19 New Mexico Pueblos, the Apache Tribes and the Navajo Nation.

CCW action has strengthened the ability and willingness of the NMED and the EPA to confront LANL; by their own admission, CCW involvement has made NMED and EPA write better permits and do an overall better job in protecting water.

The new cleanup manager at LANL has stated that the Consent Order is attainable

and that compliance means “being perfect” in fulfilling the lab’s cleanup obligations.

LANL’s attorneys, LANL Environmental Program staff, the Department of Justice Attorney representing DOE and LANL, and EPA staff have met with CCW to discuss stormwater discharge problems at LANL and the appeal of the new Individual Stormwater Permit.

Finally, at a fundamental level, CCW efforts have contributed to increasing calls for a change in LANL’s mission. 

— Article by Joni Arends
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