

## Clean Up Area G: Hundreds of Jobs Could Be Created that Protect the Environment

**Summary:** New Mexicans should push their politicians to vigorously lobby for comprehensive cleanup at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). Unlike nuclear weapons programs, **cleanup would be a win-win that permanently protects the environment while creating hundreds of high paying jobs.** Specifically, the New Mexico Environment Department should be pressured to NOT condone the *de facto* creation of a permanent nuclear waste dump by approving “cap and cover” of an estimated one million cubic meters of radioactive wastes and contaminated backfill at the Lab’s Area G. Instead, NMED should require full excavation and offsite disposal of the radioactive and toxic wastes.

**Political and Regulatory Background:** In large part because of jobs, the New Mexican congressional delegation has supported a huge new plutonium facility for nuclear weapons at LANL called the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Project (CMRR), which has been deferred because of budget constraints. But the sad fact is, as the government’s own documents explicitly stated, **the CMRR’s exorbitant cost of up to 6 billion taxpayer dollars would NOT have produced a single new permanent job** (instead it would have merely relocated existing jobs). In contrast, **comprehensive cleanup of Area G, the Lab’s biggest radioactive dump, could create hundreds of high paying jobs for decades while permanently protecting the environment.**

In 2005, following difficult negotiations and lawsuits by the federal government against New Mexico, the U.S. Department of Energy signed a legally binding Consent Order demanded by the state Environment Department that stipulated extensive milestones on the road to comprehensive cleanup at LANL. In part, the Lab is required to remove the large fabric air buildings at Area G which house plutonium-contaminated bomb wastes destined for disposal at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in southern New Mexico. However, Governor Martinez’s administration has agreed to give two-year extensions to more than 30 milestones when the Consent Order itself is set to expire at the end of 2015. This scheme includes prioritizing accelerated shipments of above-ground WIPP wastes while allowing the Lab to renege on its other cleanup milestones. NMED gave away the store because in this case “accelerated” only means catching up to what LANL was previously required to do.



Nevertheless, federal budgets constraints are being used as the pretext for forcing the false choice between accelerated WIPP shipments or the cleanup of buried contaminated wastes. However, one of the primary purposes of the Consent Order to begin with was to compel LANL to seek adequate funding for cleanup, instead of just nuclear weapons. The Martinez Administration has preemptively surrendered the state’s leverage while accommodating LANL. *Area G, with pits and shafts for “low-level” radioactive wastes to the left and fabric buildings on the right for storing transuranic wastes destined for WIPP in southern NM.*

**Some technical aspects of Area G:** Because it reportedly contains one million cubic meters of radioactive wastes and contaminated backfill, thought to be 80% of LANL's currently buried inventory, comprehensive cleanup of Area G would be tantamount to comprehensive cleanup of the Lab itself. LANL claims that Area G is just a "low-level" radioactive waste dump under legal definitions. However, in reality some low-level wastes can be more radioactive than the WIPP-bound plutonium-contaminated "transuranic" wastes. Furthermore, Area G began operations in 1957, long before the advent of environmental laws and decent record keeping. Therefore the contents of Area G are in part unknown - - there could be both buried high-level and transuranic radioactive wastes. In all cases, boxes, drums and containers of radioactive wastes were dumped directly into unlined pits and shafts. DOE has always resisted, not only at LANL, but also across the entire country, disposing of radioactive wastes in modern landfills with multiple liners and leachate collection systems. This is especially outrageous given that NMED will not allow any county or municipality in this state to get away without modern landfills, yet **DOE and the Los Alamos and Sandia National Labs continue to dump radioactive wastes directly into New Mexican soil.**

For an idea of what's in Area G see: <http://nukewatch.org/importantdocs/resources/AGCME-inventories.pdf>

**What LANL wants:** The Lab narrowly limited its analyses of "cleaning up" Area G to two methods, with estimated costs, timelines and worker-hours. The first method LANL proposed is evapotranspiration cover (or "**cap and cover**"), costing \$386 million. This would take three years to build, followed by 30 years of monitoring and soil vapor extraction and a century of "institutional controls" (i.e. fences). In all this would require an estimated 424,000 worker-hours to cover 51 acres and maintain it for 30 years, **but leaves all wastes permanently buried!**

The second method the Lab analyzed is full excavation of more than 100 pits and shafts, with off-site waste disposal and excavated areas backfilled with clean material, costing \$29 billion. This would take 30 years to complete, requiring an estimated 108 million worker-hours. However, we believe that when the Lab wants to do something (like the CMRR) it lowballs the price; but when it does NOT want to do something (like full cleanup of Area G) it dramatically highballs the costs.

Nuclear Watch NM completed a cost comparison of actual and estimated costs from other projects in order to realistically estimate costs for full cleanup. We believe Area G can be comprehensively cleaned up for less than \$7 billion, far less than LANL's estimated \$29 billion. With nearly half of that for labor costs, it would be money well spent, creating hundreds of jobs while permanently protecting groundwater and the Rio Grande.

For our cost comparison please see: [http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/Area\\_G\\_Comparison\\_Costs-11-14-12.pdf](http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/Area_G_Comparison_Costs-11-14-12.pdf)

The method and degree of completeness of required Area G cleanup is yet to be approved by NMED, but we believe the Department is leaning toward condoning cap and cover, and therefore the *de facto* creation of a permanent nuclear waste dump. **Public participation will be vital to counter this!** NMED can only approve LANL's plan until after public comment. The City of Santa Fe has weighed in with a resolution that seeks full excavation and offsite disposal of Area G wastes, which other local governments should be encouraged to follow. Only sustained citizen pressure can help guarantee the only right outcome, which is comprehensive cleanup of Area G.

**Real security demands a clean environment and sustainable jobs. Why can't New Mexicans have jobs that protect the environment? Don't let LANL "clean up" on the cheap through cap and cover. Demand real cleanup, a win-win for New Mexicans that permanently protects the environment while creating hundreds of jobs!**

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