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Lab Chromium Contamination Confirmed on San Ildefonso Pueblo Land Comprehensive Cleanup Needed Instead of More Nuclear Weapons

Santa Fe, NM – The New Mexico Environment Department has announced:

“A toxic chromium plume from Los Alamos National Laboratory has spread beyond Lab boundaries onto Pueblo de San Ildefonso land for the first time, with contamination exceeding state groundwater standards... These new results are conclusive evidence that the U.S. Department of Energy’s efforts to contain the chromium plume have been inadequate.”

In reality, chromium groundwater contamination probably migrated beyond the LANL/San Ildefonso Pueblo boundary long ago, with past Lab [maps](#) of the plume “magically” stopping at the border. In the past, tribal leadership has commented that it was fortunate that the contamination stopped there, but that any future indications of groundwater contamination on Pueblo land could have serious consequences. The San Ildefonso Pueblo is a sovereign Native American tribal government.

As late as the late 1990s the Lab was falsely claiming that groundwater contamination was impossible because underlying volcanic tuff is “impermeable.”¹ This ignored the obvious fact that the Parajito Plateau is heavily seismically fractured, providing ready pathways for contaminant migration to deep groundwater. By 2005 even LANL acknowledged that continuing increasing contamination of the regional aquifer is inevitable.² Some 300,000 northern New Mexicans rely upon the aquifer for safe drinking water. The potential serious human health effects (including cancer) caused by chromium contamination was the subject of the popular movie *Erin Brockovich*.

¹ “Personnel from the Laboratory’s Environmental Restoration Project have found preliminary indications of low levels of tritium in two perched groundwater zones - saturated areas that are segregated from the main aquifer by impermeable geologic formations - in Los Alamos Canyon.” <https://web.archive.org/web/20081108082730/http://www.lanl.gov/orgs/pa/News/121197text.html>, Dec. 11, 1997

² “Future contamination at additional locations is expected over a period of decades to centuries as more of the contaminant inventory reaches the water table.” LANL’s Hydrogeological Studies of the Parajito Plateau (1998-2004), 2005, p. 5-15, <http://www.worldcat.org/title/los-alamos-national-laboratorys-hydrogeologic-studies-of-the-pajarito-plateau-a-synthesis-of-hydrogeologic-workplan-activities-1998-2004/oclc/316318363>

LANL's chromium contamination plume is at least one mile long, a half mile wide and 100 feet thick.³ It is commonly regarded as the Lab's most serious environmental threat. One drinking water supply well for Los Alamos County has already been shut down because of the plume. But even two decades after it was first reported, the Lab still doesn't know how big the chromium plume is.

On December 30, 2024, in the middle of the holiday season, the Lab posted the report *Independent Review of the Chromium Interim Measures Remediation System* to its largely unknown Legacy Cleanup Electronic Public Reading Room. The Report's bottom line was:

"...at this time the plume is not sufficiently characterized to design a final remedy... data gaps and uncertainties need to be addressed before committing to an alternative or final remedy."

From 1956 to 1972, water containing potassium dichromate was used to prevent corrosion in cooling towers, releasing as much as 160,000 pounds of potassium dichromate into the headwaters of Sandia Canyon.⁴ Over a 3-year period ending in November 2022, the Department of Energy extracted, treated and reinjected more than 400 million gallons of groundwater. But the December 2024 chromium report stated that only ~680 pounds of chromium was actually removed.⁵ At this rate it will take more than a century to treat and remediate the chromium plume.

While failing to recommend a final remedy, the new chromium report did argue that extraction and treatment of groundwater should be continued. However, in order to speed up cleanup as part of any final remedy, Nuclear Watch New Mexico argues for pumping or trucking the treated groundwater uphill to flush out the chromium contamination at its source. In addition, more monitoring wells should be installed to finally determine the true depth and breadth of the chromium contamination that threatens northern New Mexico's largest supply of drinking water.

Since chromium contamination was first reported in 2004, the Lab's nuclear weapons budget has more than doubled to \$5 billion (now 84% of LANL's ~\$6 billion annual budget). Cleanup is being cut to \$278 million (less than 5% of the Lab's total budget), as are virtually all non-nuclear weapons programs (research into renewable energies is being eliminated).⁶

³ <https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2023-09/Chromium%20Plume%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>

⁴ *Compendium of Technical Reports Conducted Under the Work Plan for Chromium Plume Center Characterization*, LANL 2018, https://epr.lanl.gov/?utf8=✓&search_field=all&q=Compendium+of+Technical+Reports+Conducted+Under+the+Work+Plan+for+Chromium+Plume

⁵ *Independent Review of the Chromium Interim Measures Remediation System in Mortandad Canyon Los Alamos, New Mexico. December 2024*, pdf Pg. 25, https://ext.em-la.doe.gov/GovFTPFiles/api/GetFiles/GetFile?fileName=EMID-703545_Final_IRT_Report_123024.pdf (22.3 MB)

⁶ See LANL budget graph at <https://nukewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/FY26-Lab-Table-spreadsheets-Chart-1.pdf> derived from the Department of Energy's FY 2026 Congressional Budget Request (particularly the "[Laboratory Tables](#)."

According to the independent Government Accountability Office, expected completion of Lab cleanup has been repeatedly pushed back, most recently to 2043 with an estimated cost of \$7 billion.⁷ But even this is a false cleanup with the Lab planning to “cap and cover” some 800,000 cubic yards of radioactive and toxic wastes, leaving them permanently buried in unlined pits and shafts as a perpetual threat to groundwater. As the Lab becomes more and more a nuclear weapons production site for plutonium “pit” bomb cores, it remains woefully ignorant over the extent and depth of the contamination it has caused to the regional groundwater aquifer. At the same time, LANL continues to downplay widespread plutonium contamination in soil, water and plants.⁸

Jay Coghlan, Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, commented: “LANL’s expanding nuclear weapons programs are a two-fold threat. First, they fuel the new nuclear arms race that threatens all of humanity. At the same time, they rob funding from vitally needed cleanup that would permanently protect our irreplaceable groundwater. As is commonly said in northern New Mexico, “Aqua es Vida!” Nuclear weapons can destroy both.”

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The New Mexico Environment Department’s November 13, 2025 news release *Chromium plume from Los Alamos National Laboratory migrates onto Pueblo de San Ildefonso* is available at https://cloud.env.nm.gov/resources/_translator.php/NjRkNzEzNmJhYTU4ZDYwYzdhZjJlZjk4Yl8yMDk5MDQ~.jpg

The *Independent Review of the Chromium Interim Measures Remediation System in Mortandad Canyon Los Alamos, New Mexico. December 2024* is available at https://ext.em-la.doe.gov/GovFTPFiles/api/GetFiles/GetFile?fileName=EMID-703545_Final_IRT_Report_123024.pdf (22.3 MB)

This press release is available at <https://nukewatch.org/lab-chromium-contamination-confirmed-on-san-ildefonso-pueblo-land>

⁷ DOE Needs to Address Weaknesses in Program and Contractor Management at Los Alamos, Government Accountability Office, July 2023, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105665.pdf>

⁸ See *Super weapons grade 239+240Pu as a contaminant of concern in sediment, soil, water and vegetation: Acid Canyon and Los Alamos Canyon, New Mexico*, Dr. Michael Ketterer, August 13, 2024, <https://nukewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Ketterer-AcidCanyon-13Aug2024.pdf>