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In Response to Demand, NNSA Backs Off of “Interim Operations” at Los Alamos’s Biolab

Nuclear Watch New Mexico learned in March that the Los Alamos National Laboratory planned to begin “interim operations” at a “Biosafety Level 3” (BSL-3) facility for bioweapons agents such as anthrax and plague. Nuclear Watch’s attorney Letty Belin warned the Department of Energy’s National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) that a citizen lawsuit was likely should the agency approve the Lab’s plans before required environmental review was completed. NNSA legal counsel has now responded that the agency “will not authorize interim operations at the Los Alamos National Laboratory’s new BSL-3 facility.”

In August 2003 Nuclear Watch sued NNSA over the adequacy of a cursory “environmental assessment” that approved operations at the newly built biolab. NNSA subsequently withdrew approval and formally announced it would prepare a more comprehensive “environmental impact statement” that would analyze and review three alternative missions. Amongst them was a “No-Action Alternative, under which the constructed facility would not be operated.” Despite that, Los Alamos asked for approval of interim operations for lower level biological activities, long before the draft environmental impact statement has been released.

Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch’s Director, praised the agency for its decision. “We’re glad NNSA made the right choice, even if it took the threat of litigation to compel it. Our position is that bioweapons research, even for purported defensive purposes, at a secret nuclear weapons site is a provocative signal to other countries. Widening access to fatal pathogens and the Lab’s poor track record on safety and security add fuel to our concerns.”

The draft environmental impact statement for LANL’s BSL-3 has been delayed for over three years, but is currently scheduled for release this summer. Public hearings and a comment period will follow.

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Nuclear Watch’s March 28 letter of demand to NNSA is available at
<http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/l-nnsa-interim-activs-032807.pdf>
NNSA’s May 1 response is available at
http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/BSL-3_nnsa_ltr-050107.pdf