

## Clean Up, Don't Build Up Nuclear Weapons Programs! Hundreds of Jobs Could Be Created that Protect the Environment

**Summary:** New Mexicans should push their politicians to vigorously lobby for comprehensive cleanup at LANL. Unlike nuclear weapons programs, cleanup would be a win-win that permanently protects the environment and creates hundreds of high paying jobs. Specifically, the NM Environment Department should be pressured to NOT condone the *de facto* creation of a permanent nuclear waste dump by signing off on “cap and cover” of an estimated 18 million cubic feet of radioactive wastes at LANL’s Area G. Instead, NMED should require full characterization and excavation of the wastes; the possible safe recycling of some materials; offsite disposal of any high-level or transuranic radioactive wastes; and the reburial of remaining low-level radioactive wastes in a modern landfill with liners, in stark contrast to today’s direct burial in dirt.

**Political and Regulatory Background:** In part because of jobs, the New Mexican congressional delegation supports the proposed new Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Project (CMRR) at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). The CMRR’s primary purpose is to quadruple the production of plutonium pit triggers for nuclear weapons to up to 80 per year. The sad fact is, as the government’s own documents explicitly state, **the CMRR’s exorbitant investment of up to 6 billion taxpayer dollars will NOT produce a single new permanent job** (instead it would merely relocate 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 (DOE) 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 back 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 the visible current pits and shafts for “low-level” radioactive wastes to the left and fabric buildings on the right for storing transuranic plutonium bomb wastes destined for WIPP in southern NM.*

**Some technical aspects of Area G:** Because it reportedly contains 18 million cubic feet of radioactive wastes, 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 all across the 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.**

**What LANL wants:** The Lab narrowly limited its analyses of remediating 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 vapor extraction and a century of "institutional controls" (i.e. fences). In all this would require an estimated 424,000 worker-hours to construct a cover of 51 acres and maintain it for 30 years, **but leaves all of the wastes in place!**

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 fully cleanup Area G) it dramatically highballs the costs. There is no mystery as to what the LANL wants, as it has made explicitly clear that it wants **cleanup on the cheap with cap and cover so that it can declare Area G "cleaned up."** In contrast, plutonium-239, LANL's material of choice for nuclear weapons research and production, remains an environmental threat for its ten half-lives (240,000 years).

**What Nuclear Watch NM wants:** The method and degree of completeness of required Area G cleanup is yet to be determined by NMED. **Public participation will be vital!** The Environment Department must approve whatever LANL proposes following a public comment period. The Lab rejected our preferred alternative, which is full characterization and excavation of the wastes; the possible safe recycling of some buried materials; offsite disposal of any high-level or transuranic radioactive wastes; and the reburial of remaining low-level radioactive wastes in a modern landfill with liners, in stark contrast to today's direct burial in dirt.

This is not ideal. The complete removal of waste would be better, but we fear that complete off-site disposal is simply cost-prohibitive, especially in today's fiscal climate. But in any case, the Lab should not be allowed to get away with just cap and cover (perhaps better put as "hide and hope"). There should be a middle alternative that protects our precious but limited water resources while creating well-paying jobs, a real win-win for New Mexicans and the environment.

**Real security demands a clean environment and sustainable jobs. Cleanup, don't build up nuclear weapons programs! Create jobs for New Mexicans that protect the environment!  
Don't let LANL "clean up" on the cheap through cap and cover!**

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