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## **Lab's Cold War Mortgage Is Past Due New Remediation Estimates Range Up To \$32 Billion**

**Santa Fe** - A recently released report from Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) sharply increases cost estimates for various remediation alternatives for the Lab's largest radioactive waste dump. This is revision 2 of a corrective measures evaluation (CME) conducted for Material Disposal Area (MDA) G. This CME increases the cost estimates for all proposed alternatives including the most expensive option, total excavation and disposal of the wastes offsite, now estimated at over **\$32 billion**.

The method of remediation is yet to be determined by the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED). Public participation will be important! NMED must approve the report, propose a preferred remedy, and start a public comment period. The Lab wants to simply "cap and cover" the wastes, maintain "institutional controls" (such as fences) for 100 years, and **call it cleaned up**. In contrast, one of the primary contaminants at MDA G, plutonium-239 used in nuclear weapons, remains dangerous for 100,000 years.

The objectives of this CME were to (1) provide an evaluation of corrective measure alternatives, (2) describe how alternatives will be monitored, and (3) recommend a corrective measure to the NMED for approval.

After a prescribed elimination process, the Lab retained alternatives for further evaluation. Below are three of the 12 alternatives retained to remediate the pits and shafts and their estimated costs, timeline and worker-hours. (In addition to alternatives for remediating the pits and shafts, there are also alternatives to remediate large plumes of contamination under MDA G.)

### **1. Evapotranspiration (ET) cover**

= \$192,623,202, 3 years construction (30 years monitoring and 100 years institutional controls), and 600,000 worker-hours

An ET cover of 51 acres will be constructed and maintained for 30 yr.

### **2. Excavation of pits and shafts with on-site disposal in an approved landfill**

= \$17,728,900,025, 30 yrs, and 58 million worker-hours

Waste from the pits and shafts will be excavated and disposed on-site in a new landfill approved by NMED and engineered with a liner and a leachate collection system (Area G has neither). The excavated areas will be backfilled with clean fill material. Some waste will require ex situ treatment before disposal in the landfill.

### **3. Excavation of pits and shafts with off-site disposal**

= \$32,340,510,056, 30 years, and 115 million worker-hours  
Waste from the pits and shafts will be excavated and shipped off-site for disposal.  
The excavated areas will be backfilled with clean fill material.

The Lab's recommendation for "cleanup" of Area G was one of the cheapest alternatives, an Evapotranspiration (ET) cover costing \$192 million, plus additional soil-vapor extraction costing \$93 million to remediate the VOC contamination plumes under the site, for a total of \$285 million. This "cap and cover" recommendation estimates 1.5 million worker-hours, which at 2,000 hrs/yr would equal 750 worker-years, or roughly 250 workers for 3 years.

In contrast, Nuclear Watch New Mexico urges NMED to approve the excavation of pits and shafts with on-site disposal in an approved landfill (we fear the \$32 billion cost of offsite disposal is prohibitive in today's fiscal climate). With some added soil-vapor extraction, the estimated 58 million worker-hours to accomplish this alternative would provide would equal some **1,000 jobs for 30 yrs**. The average budget for this would be around \$600 million per year. This may seem like an extravagant amount, but is only about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the **Lab's current annual budget** and less than  $\frac{1}{2}$  of its current annual budget spent on nuclear weapons activities for "National Security."

**We argue that we don't need more nuclear weapons - - for real security we need a clean environment and sustainable jobs.**

Scott Kovac, operations director for Nuclear Watch New Mexico, commented, "The Lab never chooses cheap alternatives when it comes to more improved nuclear weapons. Why then does it always go for cheap cleanup? \$600 million per year for cleanup jobs for 30 years is not too much money to do the right thing. The Lab has been spending double that yearly on its nuclear weapons programs and a new \$5 billion plutonium facility that will produce yet more radioactive wastes. In contrast, comprehensive clean up would be a win-win, good for the environment, good for jobs."

**MDA G CME Report, Revision 2** [8 MB] is available here -  
<http://www.lanl.gov/prr/Remediation/PRR-REM-0566.pdf>

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### **Some Background on Area G**

Area G, less than a mile west of the Lab's bedroom community of White Rock, has been LANL's "low-level" radioactive waste dump since 1982 when the relevant environmental waste disposal law went into effect. However, Area G has been in operation since 1957, and before 1982 more intensely radioactive materials such as "mixed fission products", "graphite fuel rods", "reactor control rods," and "Pu-238 waste" were buried there. Covering an area equivalent to 49 football-fields, Area G has inactive, subsurface disposal units consisting of 34 pits, 194 shafts, and 4 trenches ranging from 10 to 65 feet deep. There is currently one pit accepting newly generated "low-level" wastes. The total estimated volume of all pits and shafts is over 1.6 million cubic yards.

In contrast to municipal and county landfills regulated by the state government, which has required liners since 1993, the pits and shafts at Area G are unlined. Lack of liners has allowed contamination to be released. Volatile organic compounds from solvents, and tritium (a radioactive isotope of hydrogen) plumes under the site are being measured. The volatile organic compound plumes are estimated to be a total of 26 acres wide and up to 200 feet deep.

The 2005 Consent Order requires closure of Area G. This is a legal agreement between the State of New Mexico and LANL to “remediate” Cold War legacy wastes. However, the method of remediation is yet to be determined by the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED). Public participation will be important! NMED must approve the report, propose a preferred remedy, and start a public comment period. The Lab wants to simply “cap and cover” the wastes, maintain “institutional controls” (such as fences) for 100 years, and call it cleaned up. In contrast, one of the primary contaminants at Area G, plutonium-239 used in nuclear weapons, remains dangerous for 100,000 years.

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