



Los Alamos Hires New Contractor - Starts Cleanup On the Cheap

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Santa Fe, NM – Today the Department of Energy (DOE) announced the award of the new Los Alamos National Laboratory legacy cleanup contract to Newport News Nuclear BWXT-Los Alamos, LLC. The \$1.39 billion contract is for ten years, which includes a three-year option and a two-year option. That works out to \$139 million per year. LANL’s budget request has been around \$189 million per year, but not EMLA’s entire budget goes to the cleanup contractor.

The Department of Energy (DOE) created the Environmental Management Los Alamos Field Office (EM-LA) in 2015 to shift management of the legacy cleanup work at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) from the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) to the DOE Environmental Management (EM) Office. This was after LANL sent a barrel of radioactive waste that ruptured underground at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, closing that facility for nearly three years and costing the American taxpayer at least \$1.5 billion to reopen.

But unfortunately DOE does not plan to spend what is needed for comprehensive cleanup at LANL. EMLA’s estimates of remaining cleanup range up to \$3.8 billion, but this amount includes leaving the supermajority of buried toxic and radioactive wastes buried in unlined dumps above our regional groundwater aquifer. In addition to leaving much waste uncharacterized and untreated, DOE simply ignores any wastes buried before 1970, despite the fact that some radioactive wastes remain dangerous for hundreds of thousands of years.

Jay Coghlan, Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, commented, “This dooms the Lab to cleanup on the cheap. This 140 million dollars per year to the cleanup contractor is based on a revised Consent Order by the New Mexico Environment Department that was a give away to the Los Alamos Lab. The original 2005 Consent Order held the Department of Energy’s feet to the fire to complete real cleanup or pay stipulated penalties. In contrast, the Martinez administration gave the biggest polluter in northern New Mexico a free pass, forgiving a hundred million dollars in possible fines that should have gone to our kids’ schools. New Mexicans deserve an Environment Department under a new governor that aggressively protects the environment and creates new high-paying jobs thorough enforcing comprehensive cleanup.”

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Background:

- For detailed talking points on why the revised 2016 Consent Order should be overturned, see <https://nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/Consent-Order-should-be-rescinded-9-10-17.pdf>
- In September 2016 the Department of Energy (DOE) released a *2016 Lifecycle Cost Estimate Summary* of proposed future cleanup at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). At the beginning of that document DOE declares that “An estimated 5,000 cubic meters of legacy waste remains, of which approximately 2,400 cm [cubic meters] is retrievably stored below ground”, a claim which was widely reported in New Mexican media. From there DOE estimated that it would cost \$2.9 to \$3.8 billion to complete so-called cleanup around 2040. That figure is woefully low.

However, the DOE report is far from honest. It intentionally omits any mention of 100’s of thousands of cubic meters of poorly characterized radioactive and toxic wastes just at Area G (LANL’s largest waste dump) alone, an amount of wastes 30 times larger than DOE acknowledges in the *2016 Lifecycle Cost Estimate*. In reality, DOE and LANL plan to not clean up Area G, instead installing an “engineered cover” and leaving the wastes permanently buried. This will create a permanent nuclear waste dump above the regional groundwater aquifer, three miles uphill from the Rio Grande. Radioactive and toxic wastes are buried directly in the ground without liners, and migration of plutonium has been detected 200 feet below Area G’s surface.

One of the bullet points from DOE’s statement on the LANL cleanup award –

- Retrieve, characterize, prepare and ship off-site legacy mixed-low level radioactive waste and transuranic waste (the EM Los Alamos Field Office manages the disposition of legacy waste generated between 1970 and 1998)

The problem with this is that LANL also disposed of waste from 1945 to 1970. These 25 years were like the Wild West of radioactive waste disposal, with poor or completely nonexistent records. There are no plans to cleanup wastes dumped prior to 1970. Radioactive wastes can remain dangerous for 100’s of thousands of years.

Area G opened in 1957. On a volume basis, most of the waste has been placed in unlined pits. Before the mid-1990s, the waste was typically packaged in drums, plastic bags, and cardboard boxes that were then placed into the pits in lifts. Each layer of waste was covered with crushed tuff and compacted using heavy equipment to effectively fill void spaces within the waste and provided an even, consolidated surface for the disposal of more waste. The pits and shafts at Area G range in depth from 20 to 65 feet.

The LANL- created 2011 Corrective Measures Evaluation (Rev 3) gives estimates on the waste at Area G -

- Total excavated volume – 1,654,535 yd³ (1,264,982 m³)
- Total waste volume in pits and shafts – 902,815 yd³ (690,251 m³)
- Total TRU – 54,536 yd³ (41,675 m³)
- Total Mixed Low Level Radioactive Waste – 844,388 yd³ (645,580 m³)