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LANL Falls Behind on Wildfire Protection While Expanding Nuclear Weapons Production Watchdog Calls for New Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement

Santa Fe, NM – The Department of Energy’s Inspector General is reporting that the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) is falling seriously behind in wildfire protection. This is despite the fact that the 2000 Cerro Grande Fire forced the mandatory evacuation of both LANL and the Los Alamos townsite, burned 3,500 acres of Lab property and came within a half-mile of Area G, its largest waste dump. At the time Area G stored above ground some 40,000 barrels of plutonium-contaminated radioactive wastes. It could have been catastrophic had they burst and sent respirable airborne plutonium across northern New Mexico (inhaled plutonium is a very serious carcinogen).

In 2011 the Los Conchas Fire raced 13 miles in 24 hours to the Lab’s western boundary, where it was stopped along State Highway 4. Both it and the Cerro Grande Fire sent huge plumes of harmful smoke across northern New Mexico, possibly carrying Lab contaminants as well (operation of radioactive air emissions monitoring equipment was suspended during the Cerro Grande Fire).

LANL’s budget for nuclear weapons programs was increased this year by 33% to \$2.9 billion, while DOE proposed to cut cleanup by 46% to \$120 million. Specific funding for plutonium “pit” bomb core production was more than doubled, which in turn will double future plutonium-contaminated wastes.

The threat and risks of wildfire to the Lab and northern New Mexico will continue to increase because of climate warming, drought and expanded nuclear weapons production. Despite this, the DOE Inspector General reported that:

“We found that the [LANL] contractor had not fully implemented activities designed to reduce the impact from wildland fire. Specifically, we found that mitigation measures such as tree thinning, which are necessary to reducing the risk of crown fires, were not always performed, and therefore increased the potential for a wildland fire to spread. In addition, not all fire roads were maintained in a state to ensure safe passage for firefighters and equipment responding to wildland fires in undeveloped areas, which could create dangerous conditions for emergency responders and delay response times. Further, contractor officials could not demonstrate that annual planning and preparedness activities were completed as prescribed in the Wildland Fire Management Plan. Without documenting planning and preparedness activities, there was no

assurance that all prevention and mitigation options were considered and that the site was fully prepared for wildland fire events.”¹

Because of needed wildfire protection and other issues Nuclear Watch New Mexico calls for a new LANL site-wide environmental impact statement (the last one was in 2008). There is direct precedence for this in that the NukeWatch Director commented on a draft 1999 LANL site-wide EIS in which he pointed out that DOE had failed to analyze the risk of wildfires. To its credit, DOE responded with a detailed hypothetical wildfire scenario in the final site-wide EIS and more importantly undertook substantial wildfire mitigation measures such as three thinning and fire breaks. Even LANL acknowledged the importance of public comment in the site-wide EIS, saying:

“It is a story of an EIS process, of helpful public comments, of a timely response ... then a great fire, called Cerro Grande, that proves the value of outsiders' ideas... When the Cerro Grande Fire swept down from the mountains this spring, these extra defensive steps, taken in response to the public comments, paid for themselves many times over. The savings were in the form of the harm to facilities that was reduced or avoided and reduced risk to the public that might have resulted.”²

Jay Coghlan, NukeWatch Director, commented, “The Lab and DOE have so far blocked a new site-wide environmental impact statement which as the past has shown is actually in their own best interests. We believe LANL and DOE have a legal requirement to prepare a new one and NukeWatch will be pursuing that.”

In addition, the County of Santa Fe recently passed a resolution calling upon DOE’s National Nuclear Security Administration to prepare a new LANL site-wide EIS.³ The City of Santa Fe may pass a similar resolution tomorrow (February 10, 2021).⁴

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¹ *The Department of Energy’s Wildland Fire Prevention Efforts at the Los Alamos National Laboratory*, DOE Inspector General, February 1, 2021,

<https://www.energy.gov/ig/downloads/audit-report-doe-oig-21-13>

² LANL Community Relations Office memo, September 18, 2000,

<https://hwbdocuments.env.nm.gov/Los%20Alamos%20National%20Labs/General/13435.pdf>

³ Available at https://www.santafecountynm.gov/documents/ordinances/Resolution_2021-011-p0001_-_p0005.pdf

⁴ Draft resolution available at <https://nukewatch.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Santa-Fe-City-LANL-SWEIS-Resolution-2021.pdf>