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Dear Stakeholder:

To reiterate a June 20 letter sent, the Los Alamos National Laboratory has created an Emergency Rehabilitation Team (ERT) with an aggressive, near-term program to address potential impacts of increased runoff resulting from the Cerro Grande fire and to look at long-term issues arising from the fire.

The ERT added a new communications function. John Bartlit, a Laboratory retiree with more than 30 years of technical experience at the Laboratory and an equal amount of experience as a volunteer citizen advocate for the environment, has been named communications advisor.

The following column by Bartlit was published in the Sunday, July 2, 2000, issue of the Los Alamos Monitor, where his writings on behalf of the New Mexico Citizens for Clean Air & Water organization have frequently appeared.

Sincerely,

Christina A. Armijo  
Community Relations Office Director

CAA:joa

HWA Lane 6/12/00



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# Opinions

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Sunday, July 2, 2000

Los Alamos Monitor

## ***Three voices tell one story about smoke***

By JOHN BARTLIT

For the Monitor

Many north central New Mexicans are confused and greatly troubled about what was in the air emissions from the Cerro Grande Fire. Was it safe to breathe?

Three "government" voices reply in the media and in public meetings. These are the voices of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, the New Mexico Environment Department, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, all of whom monitored the air during the fire.

These varied voices bring a single message: Wood smoke is bad to breathe and the smoke from burning buildings is worse. Yet, other than its being smoke from burning trees and homes, there was nothing bad about Cerro Grande smoke because of Los Alamos National Laboratory and its past and present activities.

Many still doubt and worry, but there's more. Each of us gives or withholds our trust according to our unique background and resulting beliefs. It proves we're human. This trait means more folks will trust information, the more differ-



### **New Mexico Citizens for Clean Air & Water**

ent, appropriate channels it may come through.

The Los Alamos Study Group — a frequent critic of the Los Alamos National Laboratory and its activities — gives their view of the risk of the Los Alamos fire smoke. This very different voice brings the same message as the "government" voices: That is, other than its being fire smoke, there was nothing special in it that could threaten the health of any member of the public who was more than a couple of miles from the fire.

The Los Alamos Study Group and Los Alamos National Laboratory disagree about many things and doubtless will disagree again. They often disagree about what nuclear policies are in the national interest; they disagree about the harm of very low levels of radiation.

Yet they agree about the fire smoke. In broad terms, the LA

Study Group and the LANL say: The smoke posed no risks to public health more than any large fire anywhere. Such agreement from disparate voices should add peace of mind for more New Mexicans than does information that comes from any one sector.

The Los Alamos Fire Update #2 (dated June 9, 2000) from the

Los Alamos Study Group reads as follows:

"While wood smoke itself is hazardous, and the smoke from burning buildings still more so, all available information strongly suggests that there were no concentrations of radioactive or toxic materials in the smoke from the fire's passage through LANL that could have threatened the health of any member of the public who was more than a couple of miles from the fire.

"This statement can be made with confidence based on available monitoring data, on knowledge of what materials could have burned (which materials actually did burn is still partially unknown), on a limited understanding of the physical processes involved in the fire, and on data from prior experiments and nuclear accident simulations

conducted elsewhere.

"We believe that none of the LANL's major holdings of radioactive or toxic materials (either stockpiled materials or wastes) burned or were in any other way seriously affected by the fire. Even if Los Alamos National Laboratory had attempted to keep such an event secret, we believe that it would not have been possible to do so, especially for this long.

"There were minor contaminant releases, of course; we just don't know yet what they were. Some hazardous materials were exposed to the fire, both on the ground and presumably also in structures, utilities, etc. which burned. We do not have detailed information about which materials actually burned, were volatilized by the fire, or were otherwise released, or in what quantities they were released.

"Depleted uranium is an example of a material that may have been present in the smoke, and is discussed further below. But to repeat, we believe that such releases could not have been of public health significance for people further than a mile or two from the fire."