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Dear Stakeholder:

As part of our Emergency Rehabilitation Team (ERT) communication effort, I'm enclosing a copy of the column written by John Bartlit. It was published in the Sunday, July 23, 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

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Community Relations Office Director

CAA:joa

Enc. a/s

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Opinions

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Sunday, July 23, 2000

Los Alamos Monitor

A fireside chat: Seeking lab communication

By JOHN BARTLIT

Beginning in the dark days of the depression, wartime leader President Franklin Roosevelt made famous the "fireside chat" as a way to reach the great American public. The fireside chat, voiced from the radio set, had a shape of its own: It was spoken. It was informal. It was not an account of the state of the union. It was more like an update. It explained more than it preached. You might call it ... a fireside chat.

Times are different now. Radios are tubeless and chats come in virtual rooms. Yet, people's feelings don't change. They still do better when they get information from a person. Information ... person, hmmm. ... Could this snippet of a thought help with a long-troubling issue for the big lab in our town?

Information and Los Alamos National Laboratory have always been a restless pair. Information is the very essence — the only essence — of a laboratory. LANL has information literally by the ton. People want it. And therein lies the problem: How can a giant laboratory get the appropriate information, and only that information, out swiftly and plainly to the public that pays the bills at LANL?

By any measure, the problem is of gigantic proportions. It involves bureaucracies from the West Coast, Los Alamos and Albuquerque, to Washington D.C. It involves congressmen and officials. It involves scientists and lawyers, the



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news media, and the public. Even finding a channel that reaches this diverse cast is well nigh to impossible. So I try the unusual channel of this Sunday's column. And turn again to the fireside chat.

Many factors make it hard to get clear, concise, and timely information out of the lab. First off is the sheer volume of it all. Then there is the bizarre language of science. To these obstacles are added the personal traits of many scientists and some of the public.

Some scientists believe they signed up to do science, not to come up with street words to explain it, which takes time and slows their work. Then too, a smallish part of the public and the media lead some at the lab to surmise that the public's goal is really not to learn the lay of the land and debate about it, but is merely to dig up a flaw someplace or tie the lab in knots. So, a few scientists come to think that if "Gotcha" is the game, why play?

How might we do better? One thought is to revive the old idea of the fireside chat: That is, more often than now, to use people, not paper. To inform well, the Freedom of Information Act

serves as a chat no better than a Tuff Shed works as a wheel. At the same time, attention must be given to the public's need to understand what is said and the laboratory's need to get other work done.

In the jargon of the lab, the new idea might resemble the idea of having Derivative Classifiers. Labbies know that a Derivative Classifier is a senior person within a technical program, who has special training and authority to help classify documents. Although its turgid name is as stuffy as the queen's guards, the idea works well to help cut through the bureaucracy to get work done.

The lab could have Derivative Communicators (sort of modern-day chatters) — senior experts within the programs of possible public interest, who have special skill, training, and authority to explain matters in their work area — to give a human sense of what goes on here. But don't get me wrong, none of this is about classified materials.

The lab owes easier link-ins to its neighbors and the nation. Our neighbors and nation expect no less from the lab. The needs are to be straight, clear, and lively, which means with a modicum of promptness and a human face.

The suggestion here is but one way to meet the laboratory's public duties. There surely are other ways. The only requirement is the broader viewpoint.