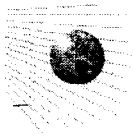

David Neleigh
10/25/00 03:08 PM

To: Anna Treinies/R6/USEPA/US@EPA, Allen Chang/R6/USEPA/US@EPA

cc:
Subject: Los Alamos ponders water-system takeover

----- Forwarded by David Neleigh/R6/USEPA/US on 10/25/00 03:07 PM -----

Cynthia Fanning
10/25/00 11:14 AM

To: Richard Mayer/R6/USEPA/US@EPA, David Neleigh/R6/USEPA/US@EPA, Kim Ngo/R6/USEPA/US@EPA, Cynthiap Wolf/R6/USEPA/US@EPA, Sam Becker/R6/USEPA/US@EPA, Jamesr Brown/R6/USEPA/US@EPA, David Bary/R6/USEPA/US@EPA

cc:
Subject: Los Alamos ponders water-system takeover

0507 General

http://www.sfnewmexican.com/health/index.las

Los Alamos ponders
water-system takeover

By KRISTEN DAVENPORT/The New Mexican - 10/25/2000

Los Alamos National Laboratory announced Tuesday that tritium has been found in the town's drinking water - two days before the Los Alamos County Council was scheduled to vote on whether the county should take over control of the town water supply from the U.S. Department of Energy.

County councilors say they will probably still vote in favor of taking over the drinking-water supply, since county officials have found companies willing to offer liability insurance on the water system in case increasing levels of contaminants are found.

The levels of tritium in the drinking water are 500 times below safety levels set by the federal government and pose no threat to public health, lab and county officials agree.

"The water is safe," said lab hydrologist David Rogers. "The real question is, what else is there underground?"

That question - what contamination might be found in drinking water in the future as well as what cleanup might be needed - has nevertheless made some councilors nervous about taking responsibility for the town's water.

LANL's discovery of tritium in the regional aquifer confirmed earlier findings from the state Environment Department. In June 1999, state hydrologists found levels at about 40 picocuries of tritium per liter, along with trace amounts of strontium-90, both radioactive byproducts of nuclear weapons work. The federal drinking-water standards say more than 20,000 picocuries per liter of tritium is a threat to human health.

Similar levels of tritium were found by LANL hydrologists in late June in tests of the Otowi-1 drinking water well in Pueblo Canyon, northeast of the lab's main technical areas.

Lab hydrologist David Rogers said scientists don't believe the tritium is natural and most likely came from the dumping of wastewater in Acid Canyon in the 1940s and 1950s. Dumping in the canyon, which runs through the town of Los Alamos, ended in 1964, Rogers said.

Tritium is an isotope of hydrogen used in some nuclear weapons work at the laboratory. Like hydrogen, it moves easily with water.

Another contaminant, perchlorate, was found in the same well this spring. This year is the first time officials have found proof that LANL activities are contaminating the town's drinking water, although scientists have found much higher levels of contaminants in shallow groundwater for several decades.

Since the inception of Los Alamos, the federal government has controlled many of the town's civic duties, including the water supply. But the county has slowly been taking over ownership of many of the town services - such as the fire department.

The Department of Energy, which runs the national weapons labs, proposed several years ago that Los Alamos County should control its own water supply. However, councilors wanted assurances that DOE would clean up any residual mess from work at the national weapons lab.

DOE has given the county an indemnification (a promise that the federal government will retain liability for its own contamination in the water), and councilors have been discussing legalities of the transfer for several months. A final vote is scheduled at a special county council meeting at noon Thursday.

"I don't think (this news) should affect their decision," said Chris Ortega, utilities manager for the county. The county hopes to take over control of the water supply, promising lower water rates for some 12,000 Los Alamos residents.

"I thought this would pass ... but with this news coming in, I don't know how they (councilors) are going to react," Ortega said. "This is just one well. We've got quite a few other wells. But I guess it could be a problem if the contamination continues to elevate."

Ortega said the county hopes to get a private liability insurance policy on the town water supply despite DOE assurances it will pay for any needed cleanup. He is hoping the council will give the county officials permission Thursday to negotiate the insurance deal.

LANL hydrologists, as well as water experts from the state and DOE, continuously monitor about 15 deep wells that tap into the Los Alamos aquifer, along with dozens of shallow wells.

About 30 more deep wells are planned in the near future, Rogers said, so scientists can continue to monitor contamination in the water.

identified selected disease outcomes for analysis, created data sets based on these outcomes, and has conducted an analysis of the data. The draft final report was submitted to ATSDR on December 14, 1999. It was reviewed by ATSDR staff members and returned to the contractor in April 2000 for revisions. The revised report is currently going through the ATSDR peer review clearance process. After the report has been cleared, ATSDR will assist the contractor in communicating results to residents, the general public, and the Fernald Health Effects Subcommittee. In addition, ATSDR is exploring options for publishing the final report, which will include a summary of a cancer study in the FMMP population that was not funded by ATSDR.

HANFORD RESERVATION, WA

ATSDR has initiated a new activity at Hanford called the Hanford Community Health Project. The National Opinion Research Center has been hired to conduct a review of health care utilization patterns and thyroid disease rates among the population potentially exposed from Hanford releases. The results of this study will assist ATSDR in designing program activities to meet the needs of this population.

Authorization and funding for the Hanford Medical Monitoring Program continues to be on hold from Congress and the Department of Energy. Discussions are continuing in efforts to secure the necessary resources to implement this program.

ATSDR is in the very early stage of developing the Hanford Birth Cohort health study, looking at the immune function disorders and cardiovascular outcomes for people born in Benton, Franklin, and Adams counties, from 1940 to 1951 who were exposed to releases of iodine-131 from the Hanford Nuclear Reservation during the 1940s and early 1950s. People who were not born in those counties will be eligible if they lived there during 1945 to 1951 and were younger than 6 years old at the time.

The Infant Mortality and Fetal Death Analysis study has evaluated the rates of infant mortality, fetal death, and preterm birth in eight southeastern Washington counties during the years 1940 through 1952. Infant and fetal mortality rates, and the rate of preterm birth were analyzed by geographic region, levels of exposure to radionuclides, time periods of exposure, and maternal and infant risk factors. The cause of death certificates were reviewed to determine any unusual patterns. The project studied more than 70,000 live births, slightly less than 2,000 infant deaths, and approximately 1,000 fetal deaths.

LOS ALAMOS, NM

ATSDR is participating in community involvement meetings to better understand local health concerns and research needs.

MONTICELLO MILL TAILINGS SITE, UT

A final public health consultation was completed during the fourth quarter of fiscal year 1999. The health consultation includes data on cancer incidence, renal failure mortality, and end-stage renal disease incidence from 1967 through 1996. The final report is currently going through the ATSDR clearance process.

ATSDR

February 26-March 2	ATSDR-NCEH, DOE & Stakeholders	Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) @ NM	Site Visit with Support Services Contractor* and Public Meeting for Document Review

*tentative