

General

INTERAGENCY FLOOD RISK ASSESSMENT TEAM

... a Consortium of organizations established to integrate communications and deliver information to the general public and interested organizations on flood and contaminant risks related to the aftermath of the Cerro Grande Fire

Participating Organizations:

New Mexico Environment Department

New Mexico Department of Health

U.S. Department of Energy

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Los Alamos National Laboratory

University of New Mexico – Center for Population Health

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FIRE-CAUSED FLOOD RISKS NEAR LANL BEING ASSESSED

(Santa Fe, NM) – The threat of flooding and contaminant movement in and around the almost 50,000 acres scorched by the Cerro Grande Fire near Los Alamos are being assessed by a team of federal, state, and independent scientists well before next year's spring thaw and summer monsoons. The Interagency Flood Risk Assessment Team (IFRAT) has been formed to better understand how contaminant transport from increased flooding due to the fire might affect downstream property owners, water users, and the general public. The IFRAT is made up of managers and scientists from the New Mexico Environment Department, University of New Mexico – Center for Population Health, Los Alamos National Laboratory, the U.S. Department of Energy, the New Mexico Department of Health, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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The IFRAT invites the public to an "Open House" on December 18, 2000, from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. at the Santa Fe Hilton Hotel, where IFRAT members will share flood and water quality data, preliminary runoff models, flood mitigation measures taken over the summer, and an overview of what can be expected in the seasons to come with respect to runoff and flooding. "For us, the real purpose of the meeting is to hear citizens' concerns about the fire as it relates to flooding, contaminant movement, and water quality," said James Bearzi, chairman of the IFRAT and chief of the New Mexico Environment Department's Hazardous Waste Bureau. "This input will help guide our activities in the months to come."

Congressman Tom Udall, who has been at the forefront of the efforts to help rehabilitate areas affected by the fire, will deliver opening remarks at the Open House. "I am pleased that the IFRAT is working on this difficult issue and that they are welcoming the community to participate," Representative Udall said. "This is an important step in the process, and it's imperative that the experts work together with the public to minimize the impact of potential flooding before next summer's monsoon season," Udall added. The Cerro Grande Fire burned through the watersheds above Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), and the potential for contamination to move downstream because of floods has heightened concern that the Rio Grande could be affected. Significant efforts were made by LANL and the U.S. Forest Service over the summer to mitigate flood-related problems, such as excavating contaminated soil from canyons, building flood retention structures, and installing erosion control measures. However, concerns remain that flooding could still result in extensive bank and channel erosion, carrying large volumes of canyon floor sediments from LANL and the steep mountainsides above LANL to the Rio Grande, Cochiti Reservoir, and irrigated fields. Sediments derived from LANL may contain elevated levels of radionuclides, metals, and organic compounds that originally came from laboratory operations. Floods originating upstream or north of LANL may also contain elevated levels of metals and radionuclides that did not come from laboratory operations. These contaminants may result from ash and organic compounds from partial combustion of trees, forest litter, and other plant materials over the last several decades. Chemicals such as cyanide, either from fire retardant or as a natural byproduct of forest fire combustion, may also be present in the burned watersheds, and potentially be transported offsite.

To assess these flood-related risks, the IFRAT will:

- Identify areas where pollutant levels are poorly known and gather needed data;
- Use these data to estimate risk;
- Produce easy-to-understand risk information; and
- Establish means to effectively inform and interact with interested parties.

The likelihood of floods has increased greatly because the soil in burned areas now lacks plant life or the absorbing capability to slow down runoff and soak up rain and snowmelt. Monsoon rains this past summer were minimal, and flow that did occur largely missed the canyons that run through LANL. Most of the flooding occurred north of LANL, such as in Rendija and Guaje Canyons, although some flow did occur in Pajarito and Los Alamos Canyons.

The IFRAT is currently assessing large amounts of data from sampling activities conducted over the summer by NMED, LANL, EPA, and other entities. This information will be used to generate information for the public regarding the potential impacts to human health and the environment. For more information, check out the IFRAT's website at www.nmenv.state.nm.us/ifrat/.

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