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From 8/6/02 LA Monitor

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The Online News Source for Los Alamos

Los Al
NATION

General: Draft Order Editorial

Monday, December 09, 2002

MEGATONS! into

Editorials

Watching out for lab nasties

By Chris Dissinger

Before coming to Los Alamos, my understanding of nuclear contamination was limited to living in a particularly precarious spot downwind of Three-Mile Island.

When I left my home in Pennsylvania to live here, I packed the same misconceived luggage about the nuclear science and radiation that is pervasive in our society. I received the all-too-common parting shots about a soon-to-be-acquired unnatural glow emanating from my newly contaminated person. No more need for nightlights, and that sort of thing.

Some spoke to me with honest earnest about taking precautions against the cloud of radioactive waste in which I was about to make my new home. My favorite advice involved a daily soak in a bath laden with baking soda to nullify my daily exposure to whatever nasties surrounded me.

After five years of calling Los Alamos home, I have come to believe that this county is probably one of the safest communities to live in when it comes to exposure of radioactive materials. With all the monitoring and strict regulations about, I would not be surprised if there was a higher radioactive risk living next door to a kid who has his Playstation humming 24 hours a day.

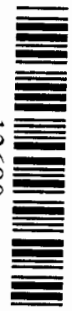
At the risk of sounding like a journalist who has been lured by his raspy-breathed father to the dark side, I cannot help but to come to the defense of the lab who is rarely — if ever — provided the benefit of doubt.

I just find it hard to believe that the residents of the most educated community on earth (at least in regards to nuclear materials) would put their families in harm's way — knowing that the risk of their next child being born with a third eye was considerably higher here than elsewhere. Furthermore, this is not some "dirty little secret," that we in the county choose to ignore.

In the last year, our newspaper ran 68 stories that contained at least one use of the word "contaminated." That compares closely to the number of times the words "Monica Lewinsky" appeared in the Washington Post a few years back. In short, we recognize the need to closely monitor our environment and do so.

If the folks who are so quick to condemn Los Alamos as a plight to our state's ecology spent an evening at one of the county's recent Comprehensive Planning sessions, they would learn that the environment is more guarded here than would be a stash of Prozac at the "What Are They Doing Now" convention of former child actors.

The most recent report detailing the health risks from New Mexico Environment Department is yet another example of how most people are challenged to reconcile the popular preconceptions about radioactive materials with the scientific facts that suggest different findings. The report includes enough instances of small but thoughtless



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errors that anyone criticized by it is left wondering how much time and effort was invested in reaching its conclusions.

It is easy to toss out a menacing sounding word — almost always ending in "ium" — and say that trace amounts of said element have been found in chipmunk scat some 50 miles away. The problem is that some meaningful context is never provided. Oftentimes, it turns out that minute quantities of the nefarious material will occur naturally and are 5,000 times less than the exposure you would receive when driving at 55 mph past a building that houses a dental X-ray machine.

In these instances the lab can only come to its own defense and risk sounding like a broken record. And that only makes people more suspicious. Reason falls by the wayside in favor of the same fears that sold "Amazing Stories" comic books back in the 1950s.

To be fair, the lab's retaliation is strikingly one-sided in much the same way a cat sealed in a remedial dog obedience class would endeavor to preserve its own fragile existence. The truth — or its closest approximation — probably lies somewhere between the hard-line stances taken by the NMED and LANL.

I do believe we — as a species — are contaminating our home planet with an abandon that will have Mother Nature packing up and leaving for a celestial RV tour. However, the problem with spending so much time and effort scrutinizing one facility is that it can leave other reckless contaminators off the hook. As long as Los Alamos National Laboratory can be kept in the spotlight ,other less-regulated polluters can operate blissfully in their lengthening shadow.

Should LANL be compulsively regulated? Yes. Should the facility be accountable to its surrounding communities? Yes. To the state? Yes. To the nation? Yes. To the world? Absolutely.

The laboratory does contain and produce some of the most wickedly nasty things that man has learned to brew, and it should be closely regulated and held accountable by each of the above mentioned entities. But to vilify an institution without taking the time to become fully educated is as equally irresponsible as the accusations these critics sometime make.

I am not a lobotomized Pollyanna who blissfully believes the lab is regulated beyond the ability to do any harm. However, coming from a background of unencumbered ignorance regarding these nuclear nasties, I now believe that taking some time to become educated will lead to more meaningful regulation and environmental protection than can be achieved by lobbing confrontational reports back and forth over a widening chasm.

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