

- LANL 2002
General

Subject: [Fwd: Quick Lab Cleanups Promised]

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Subject: Quick Lab Cleanups Promised

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FYI - In case you hadn't seen this yesterday. Interestingly, there's no mention of NMED's orders and how those may provide a means for "acceleration".

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Quick Lab Cleanups Promised



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By **John Fleck**

Journal Staff Writer

The federal government has spent \$1.4 billion since 1990 trying to clean up environmental problems at New Mexico's two nuclear weapons laboratories.

But it is still unclear when the job will be finished, or how much more it will cost.

Faced with ballooning costs and repeated schedule delays, the Department of Energy is launching an ambitious effort to speed things up, promising significant upfront money in an effort to get the job done sooner and at a lower total cost.

Without the extra money, officials project Los Alamos will not be cleaned up until 2030. With added money now, they believe that they can reduce the timeframe to 2015.

At Sandia, the program's goal is to move the cleanup date from 2009 to 2006.

Critics say the "Accelerated Cleanup" program is a hollow effort, built in part on a redefinition of "clean," leaving significant amounts of waste where they lie.

In written comments on the program, members of the environmental group Citizen Action suggested that the DOE "change the name of its 'Accelerated Cleanup Program' to 'Accelerated Cover Up.'"

Energy Department and lab officials deny the charge, saying they will save money and time by making

the cleanup process more efficient, not by leaving a mess of radioactive and hazardous wastes behind.

The final decision about whether cleanup is adequate remains with the state Environment Department and the federal Environmental Protection Agency. The Accelerated Cleanup program will not change that, said Dave McInroy, head of the cleanup program at Los Alamos.

For McInroy, the key to the program is the upfront money. Without it, he believes, the cleanup that activists want so badly could drag on for decades.

Whether the labs will get the money remains uncertain. Congress has not approved the extra funding, and the effort has drawn criticism on Capitol Hill.

"The Department has utilized this more 'money now, great savings later' strategy in a number of other areas, with limited success to date," the Democrat-controlled Senate Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittee concluded in a July 24 report.

Latest solution

"Accelerated Cleanup" is the latest federal government response to a long-standing problem.

In the waning years of the Cold War, it became clear that environmental contamination from four decades of nuclear weapons research and manufacturing was languishing, with no clear plan to clean it up.

The worst problems were at major manufacturing sites like Hanford in Washington state and Rocky Flats in Colorado.

In comparison, the problems were smaller at New Mexico's Los Alamos National Laboratory and Sandia National Laboratories, but they were significant enough that each created a major environmental cleanup program.

At Los Alamos, workers identified more than 2,000 sites that required investigation and possible cleanup because of hazardous waste from past lab activities.

Los Alamos also had significant amounts of radioactive waste awaiting shipment to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, the Energy Department nuclear waste dump located near Carlsbad.

At Sandia, 264 sites were found, from old septic tanks to four large unlined landfills.

The cleanup effort cranked up during the first Bush administration, its budget rising rapidly.

At Los Alamos, it reached \$157 million in 1994, its peak year, before declining to about half that level in recent years. At Sandia, budgets rose and fell through the 1990s, peaking at \$32 million in 2001.

Uncertain budgets were a problem, Los Alamos' McInroy said, making it difficult to make efficient long-term plans.

That uncertainty came to a head earlier this year when the Department of Energy's proposed budget for 2003 was released. It contained just \$48 million for cleanup work at Los Alamos, far below the peak of the mid-'90s.

If funding continues at that level, it would take nearly three decades to finish the job, according to McInroy.

"Los Alamos has struggled over the last couple of years to get enough of a budget," McInroy said in a recent interview.

Cleanup program

The Accelerated Cleanup program, launched by the Department of Energy at the same time the proposed 2003 budget came out, was an effort to address the problem.

It set aside \$800 million nationwide for the department to split among various DOE sites to speed up their cleanups. Each was to prepare a plan for how to spend the money, then DOE would dole it out.

Based on their plans, Sandia was allocated an additional \$8 million and Los Alamos would get an additional \$52 million.

Released in July, the plans drew immediate criticism.

The first complaint was that members of the public were given little chance to comment on them.

Members of the public were given less than a week to comment on the Sandia plan and a weekend on the Los Alamos plan, activists note.

Don Hancock of the Southwest Research and Information Center called it "a totally unacceptable schedule, since it precludes considered, in-depth public review."

Los Alamos' McInroy acknowledged that he did not have as much time as he would have liked to solicit public comment on the accelerated cleanup plan. He said the schedule was driven by the Energy Department's hurry to get cleanup plans to decide how to allocate the money.

"It got us the funding," he said.

The plan is multifaceted and achieves most of its savings simply by speeding up the work. That avoids years of unavoidable fixed costs, McInroy said — the day-to-day money it takes just to keep offices open and staff on the payroll.

The bulk of Sandia's savings in the accelerated cleanup program is similar, said Fran Nimick, manager of the Sandia cleanup effort.

Twenty percent of the annual cost of the program goes to basic unavoidable costs, things like keeping the lights turned on, Nimick explained.

Environmental fears

Critics contend that other assumptions that are being used to save money pose environmental dangers.

One goes by the name "monitored natural attenuation," and it means that contaminated ground water is left in the ground, where natural dilution will reduce concentrations to safe levels.

Los Alamos expects that will be sufficient to deal with much of the ground water beneath the lab that has been contaminated.

A similar approach is included in Sandia's plan.

That approach has not gone over well with environmental activists.

Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch New Mexico called it "monitored pollution and dilution." The group Citizen Action, in its comments on Sandia's plan, said "natural attenuation" amounts to leaving waste behind rather than cleaning it up.

McInroy defended the practice, noting that, under federal regulations, it is one effective way of ensuring that contamination is reduced to safe levels.

The largest criticism from activists, however, was reserved for other sites where contaminated materials buried in past lab operations will be left where they are.

Two large landfill areas containing radioactive materials and other hazardous chemicals — the Mixed Waste Landfill at Sandia and Area G at Los Alamos — would not be cleaned under the labs' accelerated plans.

Sandia's proposal for its landfill is to place a cover over it to prevent water from getting in and carrying off waste. Los Alamos considers its landfill an active dump site rather than a cleanup site, and the lab's own studies have convinced them that there is no chance of dangerous quantities of hazardous materials leaking into ground water.

Environmental activist Hancock remains skeptical about the whole process. He has seen similar efforts to speed the cleanup before, but the ultimate goal always slips further into the future.

The most recent happened in 1996, when then-Assistant Secretary Al Alm launched a program called "Accelerating Cleanup: Focus on 2006."

Just six years into Alm's 10-year plan, the prospect of cleanup by 2006 had largely slipped away. Hancock thinks the same thing will happen again.

"I think the process is a waste of money," he said.



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