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LANL agrees to clean up waste

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The New Mexican

Under a history-making agreement signed Tuesday by the state Environment Department, the U.S. Department of Energy and the University of California, New Mexico can assert more authority over Los Alamos National Laboratory to clean up 60 years of waste and protect natural resources.

"This order gives us a mechanism to look at the past 60 years and get at old problems," said Jon Goldstein, spokesman for the state Environment Department.

Over the next 10 years, the birthplace of the atomic bomb must tear down vacant tritium facilities, ship thousands of drums of waste to Carlsbad for underground storage, cap seeping piles of waste and take other actions. The total cost is estimated at $800 million.

"After many years of tough negotiations, this legal order puts New Mexicans in control of LANL cleanup and gives us the power to make sure this important work is completed," state Environment Secretary Ron Curry said.

Past agreements have been done with handshakes, he said. This one is enforceable in court.

If the lab misses certain deadlines, the state can charge $1,000 a day. If the deadline slips past a month, the fine jumps to $3,000. If matters worsen, the state can impose statutory penalties up to $15,000 per violation.

Both the University of California, which operates the lab, and the Energy Department are liable. It's up to them to decide who pays the fines, said Charles de Saillan, assistant gen-

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By the numbers

- **2015:** Deadline for Los Alamos National Laboratory cleanup.
- **$800 million:** Total estimated cost to clean up waste from LANL.
- **$1,000:** Daily fee state can charge if LANL misses cleanup deadlines. If the deadline slips past a month, the fine jumps to $3,000. If matters worsen, the state can impose statutory penalties up to $15,000 per violation.
- **2.53 million:** Approximate number of gallons of waste LANL must ship for underground storage at Carlsbad.
- **8,250:** Approximate number of gallons of highly radioactive waste at LANL that humans should not touch.

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eral counsel for the state Environment Department.

Tuesday's agreement was almost two years in the making. The University of California and the Energy Department fought the order in state and federal courts, then entered into settlement negotiations with the Environment Department.

Aside from Los Alamos County, San Ildefonso Pueblo, the Rio Grande and the city of Santa Fe's Buckman Well Field are situated near the laboratory.

The 200-plus-page agreement includes a schedule of what LANL must do each year. The public will be able to read the work orders — as they are developed — on the Environment Department's Web site. The public will have opportunities to comment and can request hearings.

Many of the Los Alamos contaminants will last thousands of years, Goldstein said. Depending on how land might be used — whether for residential, commercial or industrial purposes — the soil will be cleaned up to varying degrees. That's where the public comes in. When plans come up for review, members of the public can request a more vigorous cleanup from the state Environment Department, Goldstein said.

Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch of New Mexico said he supports the agreement. However, he hopes soil on the mesas, woods and canyons of lab property will be restored to higher standards than areas of the lab where industrial activities take place. Otherwise, a genuine, comprehensive cleanup at the lab will not occur, he said.

"It's a risk for future generations," he said, noting threats to the Rio Grande.

Max Baker, Los Alamos County administrator, said he doesn't worry too much about lab waste, even though some contaminants have shown up at low levels in the county's drinking water. But he said the agreement is good for county residents who value all aspects of the environment. It also will help the county obtain a piece of land from the lab.

"Even though we haven't studied the details of the agreement, we appreciate their cooperation so we can move forward on a number of issues, particularly the transfer of land from the Department of Energy to the county," he said.

Los Alamos County has its eye on Technical Area 21, located across from the Los Alamos Monitor office.

Because TA-21 is close to town, investigating the waste there will involve drilling holes and scraping the land. "If we run across some bad stuff, we're not closing (the waste) up," said David Gregory, the Energy Department's project director for environmental restoration at Los Alamos. The bad stuff will be removed, he said.

From 1943 to the present, LANL has disposed of hazardous and radioactive waste in septic systems, pits, trenches and landfills. In the early years of the agreement, drilling rigs will be busy on the lab's 40 square miles. The focus this year will be on Technical Areas 16, 21 and 54, as well as Pueblo Canyon, Bayo Canyon and Mortandad Canyon.

Groundwater and soil samples will help experts identify what contaminants may be present and to what levels. They'll look for chemicals and radioactive materials seeping out of landfills.

Then experts must determine whether the waste poses a risk to people and the environment and what should be done about it. "Depending on the levels and where it's located, sometimes it's better off leaving it there," Gregory said. Digging up waste can introduce more hazards, he said.

Fixing the problems will come in later years.

The lab also must deal with managing a staggering number of radioactive-waste containers. Imagine a single 55-gallon drum. Los Alamos has the equivalent of 46,000 of those it must ship for underground storage at Carlsbad, according to the Energy Department.

It has another 150 drums of highly radioactive waste with ingredients so dangerous no human should handle them at all. Experts are searching for safe ways to deal with this waste, said John Ordaz, assistant manager for environmental stewardship at the Energy Department's office in Los Alamos.

All environmental cleanup work must be completed by 2015.

LANL has operated as if the agreement was in place for the past two years, according to its director, Pete Nanos. It has analyzed or cleaned up waste in more than 1,350 sites, he said.

Since 2003 the lab also has reduced the amount of waste it produces — by 94 percent for hazardous waste and by 60 percent for low-level radioactive waste, Nanos said.