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Thursday, April 5, 2007

Cleanup at LANL Pressed

By John Arnold
Journal Staff Writer

The state Environment Department on Wednesday continued to press Los Alamos National Laboratory on environmental cleanup, ordering the lab to improve its groundwater monitoring system.

The department sent a letter to LANL environmental managers requiring them to speed up an evaluation of the lab's groundwater monitoring wells, deficiencies in which are impeding LANL's ability to detect possible groundwater pollution, according to state regulators.

The state wants LANL to abandon parts of damaged or defective wells and to "aggressively address" monitoring problems at several sites, including Area G, the lab's radioactive waste dump.

"The Department's concerns are borne from well-documented problems (LANL has) experienced in the placement, drilling, construction, development, and sampling of its wells," wrote James Bearzi, the Environment Department's hazardous waste bureau chief.

Lab spokesman Kathy DeLucas said that the monitoring wells referenced in the letter were drilled in an early stage of the lab's groundwater program using industrial standards of the time. Those wells were also drilled with the Environment Department's approval, she said.

"The early work was done to develop a real basic knowledge of groundwater beneath the lab," DeLucas said.

Meanwhile, efforts are already under way to evaluate and beef up the lab's monitoring network, and construction is under way on new wells to monitor chromium contamination reported in the regional aquifer in 2005, according to DeLucas.

She said the lab is committed to working with state regulators and described LANL's relationship with the Environment Department as positive.

But LANL's cleanup program— governed by a 2005 agreement, or consent order, with the state— has in recent months been routinely criticized by Environment Department officials, who have issued several fines for consent-order violations.

A former LANL environmental manager fired back last month that the state is partly to blame for cleanup delays.

Charlie Nylander criticized the department in a March 17 Journal editorial for not reviewing and approving LANL environmental reports in a timely manner.

Bearzi responded in a letter to the editor published March 30 that "some in the 'old guard' at LANL seem to chafe at strong state oversight of the lab." He also said LANL's groundwater protection program, which Nylander headed until retiring last year, is an example of LANL's poor performance in environmental management.

While workers drilled dozens of wells in the last decade to monitor groundwater contamination, "many of those wells have fatal flaws in construction and drilling methods that render them largely unusable," Bearzi wrote.

State presses LANL on water monitoring

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Andy Lenderman | The New Mexican
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State Environment Secretary Ron Curry is pushing Los Alamos National Laboratory to better track the safety of drinking water.

New rules proposed by Curry would require lab managers to spend millions of dollars to drill new wells at the lab to watch for contaminants resulting from Cold War nuclear-weapons work. But the lab is still negotiating with Curry's office on how to deal with the issue.

"We want to see them perform as far as their environmental cleanup goes," Curry said Wednesday. "And how they perform is the ultimate measurement."

The lab is committed to working cooperatively with Curry's office, which regulates environmental cleanup efforts, and the federal agency that oversees the lab, a spokeswoman said. But the lab did not commit to Curry's specific requests Wednesday. "We're in negotiations for how we're going to get it accomplished," lab spokeswoman Kathy DeLucas said.

Accurate groundwater monitoring is crucial to protect the regional aquifer -- the sole water supply for the lab and the towns of Los Alamos and White Rock, the department said.

Lab officials have estimated about 700 sites need to clean up at the lab, and the cost to do that work comes to about $1 billion. Money for such work is appropriated by Congress on a yearly basis.

Curry's deputy, James Bearzi, criticized the lab in a seven-page letter that said lab managers "must make a much greater effort to address this problem."

Bearzi said "groundwater monitoring beyond reproach" is crucial to protect the water and to comply with a consent order, a legal agreement that regulates cleanup at the lab.

"As you know," Bearzi wrote to lab managers, "the order has ambitious, but negotiated, cleanup goals. The

department remains committed to following the schedule agreed to by both parties in the order."

Curry said the system of monitoring wells "fails too often and has improperly drilled and constructed wells."

He has asked that the lab fix problems at three areas, including Technical Area 54, the lab's main waste-management unit; Technical Area 50, a waste-treatment area; and Technical Area 21, which hosted plutonium work in the 1950s, according to the department.

DeLucas, the lab spokeswoman, said by e-mail that these wells were drilled with state and federal approval.

"We now recognize using drilling fluids and mud could potentially influence test results, and we are working with (the U.S. Department of Energy) and (The New Mexico Environment Department) on a path forward," she said. "We look forward to continuing working very closely with DOE and NMED on the groundwater monitoring plan in an attempt to understand how the water flows underneath the laboratory."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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