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Headline News

Contamination of Rio Grande grew after Cerro Grande MONITOR STAFF REPORT

Effects from the Cerro Grande Fire of May 2000 have increased the discharge of radioactive contaminants into the Rio Grande, according to a study released Friday by the state's Environment Department. In an announcement, Environment Secretary Ron Curry said the report was a call for action.

"Since the Cerro Grande Fire, elevated levels of contaminants continue to flow from the Pajarito Plateau into the Rio Grande during floods," Curry said. "Los Alamos National Laboratory must take action to reduce and control the movement of contaminated sediments from lab boundaries."

The report by the NMED Department of Energy Oversight Bureau was started in 1998 as a five-year study, but the period was extended after the Cerro Grande Fire to document additional effects.

Some of the radionuclides released during the early years of lab operations were washed downstream into the Rio Grande during a period of heavy flooding, and some contaminants were buried under new sediment deposits.

After the Cerro Grande Fire, more powerful floods coming off the bare flanks of the mountains eroded the banks of the canyons, exposing and transporting the old contaminants.

The NMED analysis investigated isotopes of plutonium, uranium, americium, strontium and cesium, and made use of a laboratory methodology that can identify percentages of plutonium that can be attributed to discharges from LANL.

Historically, the largest transport rate of plutonium 239 and 240 was 44 millicuries (mCi) in 1957, according to the report, followed by 22 mCi in 1968 and 18 and 17 mCi in 1952 and 1951 respectively. (A millicurie is one-thousandth of a curie which is equivalent to the amount of radioactivity in one gram of radium, the element discovered by Pierre and Marie Curie in 1898.)

In comparison with the historical transport of plutonium, 55 mCi was measured in 2001, 24 mCi in 2002 and 8 mCi in 2000.

"Preliminary assessments of storm water since 2002 to the end of 2006 indicates an additional 111 mCi of (plutonium 239 and 240) has been transported out of Pueblo Canyon," the report continues.

"Transport rates as large as these have not been seen since the 1950s and 1960s."

NMED scientists Ralph Ford-Schmid and David Englert, who contributed to the study, recommend the laboratory construct additional weirs, or filtering devices, like the one that was build in Los Alamos Canyon after the fire, to capture sediment.

They also suggest the laboratory notify officials in Santa Fe when water is flowing in Los Alamos Canyon, so that the city can stop



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drawing water from the Rio Grande.

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