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Saturday, May 23, 2009

State Proposes \$1.87M Fine on DOE

Associated Press

The state Environment Department on Friday proposed a \$1.87 million fine against the U.S. Department of Energy and managers of Los Alamos National Laboratory, alleging that the lab failed to abandon a groundwater monitoring well that is leaking contamination.

The state agency alleges that contamination is flowing in the direction of a deep drinking water aquifer used by the towns of Los Alamos and White Rock.

A lab spokesman, Fred deSousa, emphasized that the communities' drinking water is safe.

"That's our top priority," he said. "Our data tells us the water is leaking from one pocket in the ground to another pocket, but it's still 400 feet above the water supply."

The order requires the lab to comply

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with previous corrective actions for releases of contaminants into groundwater, and deSousa said work is scheduled to begin next month.

The proposed fine offers the lab a chance to enter into settlement discussions with the Environment Department.

"We don't like missing our commitments to the state and we look forward to working with them to get this resolved," deSousa said.

The well is known to have elevated levels of chromium, perchlorate, nitrate and tritium — contaminants all used in historical lab operations, the state agency said.

Chromium is known to cause kidney and liver damage in humans who drink contaminated water and can cause cancer. Perchlorate can affect thyroid function and the body's ability to regulate metabolism and growth.

The Environment Department contends that the alleged failure by the DOE and Los Alamos National Security LLC to abandon the well in Mortandad Canyon in a timely manner violated a 2005 cleanup order.

Under that consent order, the lab submitted a plan in October 2007 to plug and abandon the well to prevent contaminated groundwater from leaking into the aquifer. The state approved the plan and required the work be finished by June 30, 2008.

The department said the lab has not completed the work. After the plan was approved, it said, the DOE and lab managers notified the state that "resource limitations" prevented them from complying.

State Environment Secretary Ron Curry said he's troubled by "the lab's

Year Later, Mystery Remains

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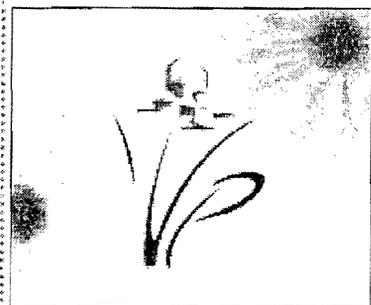
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failure to comply with the department's directives," including those "protecting the regional aquifer from this leaking well."

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