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Cleanup Likely to Fall Behind

By Raam Wong
Journal Staff Writer

Los Alamos National Laboratory is unlikely to stay on schedule with an environmental cleanup agreement with the state, according to a federal report released Tuesday.

Federal budget shortfalls and delays in the shipment of hazardous waste from Los Alamos will likely hamper U.S. Department of Energy efforts to carry out the cleanup agreement, or consent order, according to the report.

The delays "may increase the risk of employee and public exposure to contaminants," states the audit by the DOE's Inspector General.

The agreement was reached between DOE, Los Alamos and the state Environment Department in 2005. It calls for the identification and cleanup of decades of hazardous waste over the lab's 40-square-mile property by 2015.

But funding has been a major concern

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since the agreement was signed and the state has already fined the lab \$750,000 for violating the order.

Projected shortfalls for cleanup will peak at a cumulative \$236 million, which does not include an additional \$947 million for "unfunded contingencies," the report states.

DOE spokeswoman Joann Wardrip said parts of the cleanup agreement may need to be renegotiated now that the agency has a better handle on the cost and scope of cleanup.

"Our ultimate goal is to complete the cleanup," Wardrip said.

State Environment Secretary Ron Curry said in a statement that DOE appeared to be engaging in "wishful thinking" if it believed projects could be reprioritized.

"The state of New Mexico will not renegotiate the Consent Order," Curry said.

DOE met 54 of the agreement's 56 milestones in fiscal year 2007 but has acknowledged falling behind in 2008, according to the report.

The audit focused on two major waste disposal sites. Area L was used for nearly 25 years to deposit drums of nonradioactive liquid waste in deep underground shafts, while Area G is the lab's largest disposal site.

Decontamination and decommissioning of dozens of structures in the two areas did not begin in 2007 as planned, according to the audit, while delays have hampered the removal of high-activity transuranic waste from Area G.

Absent a "dramatic change in approach," the audit found DOE is unlikely to fulfill the agreement's requirement that remediation of areas L and G be completed by 2011 and 2015

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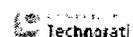
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respectively.

The audit also found DOE failed to fully identify its cleanup funding needs until November 2007 and that major budgetary shortfalls are likely in the years to come.

Greg Mello of the anti-weapons Los Alamos Study Group, said these sorts of problems were expected because the cleanup agreement was front-loaded with costly investigatory work that had little bearing cleanup solutions.

Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., said the report highlighted DOE's budget woes.

"I believe it is vital that the (National Nuclear Security Administration) begin immediate work with the state of New Mexico to prioritize the projects that pose the most immediate risks," Domenici said in a statement.

DOE officials have said the Bush administration's 2009 budget proposal for cleanup at LANL is about \$100 million short of what's needed to meet the year's milestones.

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