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Thursday, April 10, 2008

Lack of Funds May Slow LANL Cleanup

By Michael Coleman
Journal Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON— Environmental cleanup at Los Alamos National Laboratory remains in limbo because the Bush administration hasn't set aside enough money for the job.

Department of Energy officials said Wednesday they are reshuffling nuclear cleanup priorities nationwide because of tight federal budget constraints. It remains unclear which projects will move to the top of the list, the officials said.

The administration included \$164 million in its 2009 budget proposal for cleanup at LANL, but that's about \$100 million short of what's needed to meet federal benchmarks set in a 2005 cleanup agreement with the state Environment Department.

The so-called consent order calls for a fence-to-fence cleanup of hazardous waste over the lab's 40-square-mile property by 2015.

Regulators fear that if left untreated,

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contaminants could pollute regional drinking water supplies, among other problems.

James Rispoli, DOE's assistant secretary for environmental management, told a congressional subcommittee Wednesday that the federal government is negotiating with states, including New Mexico, to determine which cleanup projects should take priority.

"We are in a dialogue to discuss, from a relative risk standpoint, which cases need to be done and which ones could be postponed, if you will," Rispoli said.

State Environment Department officials in recent weeks have accused DOE of attempting to wiggle out of its commitments under the cleanup agreement and indicated it will continue to fine the lab when benchmarks are missed.

New Mexico already has fined the lab \$750,000 for violations of the cleanup agreement.

Sen. Pete Domenici, the top Republican on the Senate Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittee, said during Wednesday's hearing the Bush administration's budget is inadequate.

"Your budget again fails to provide adequate funding to meet the milestones negotiated between DOE and the state of New Mexico for cleanup at Los Alamos," Domenici said.

Unlike in previous years, Domenici said he is not sure he can convince Congress to add the money to its budgets this year.

"I am not confident that I will be able to find \$100 million needed to keep the cleanup in compliance with the agreement you negotiated," Domenici said.

Domenici said administration budget requests for the DOE environmental cleanup projects nationwide have dwindled

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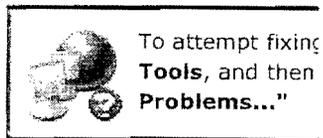
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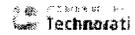


from more than \$7 billion in 2005 and 2006 to just \$5.5 billion for 2009.

"It's really embarrassing and very troubling when they enter into an agreement and then the feds come along and don't have the money to do it," Domenici said in an interview after the hearing. "And that's where we are now."

Journal Northern Bureau staff writer Raam Wong contributed to this report.

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