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Tuesday, March 6, 2007

Cleanup Tied to Lab Funds

By [John Arnold](#)
Journal Staff Writer

An "untenable budget situation" is delaying environmental cleanup at Los Alamos National Laboratory, and a cleanup agreement between the federal and state governments may need to be changed to reflect those federal budget restraints, according to U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M.

He said in a news release issued Monday that LANL is "stuck between a rock and a hard place."

"It must make more progress (on cleanup), but its hands have been tied with insufficient funding and now a steady stream of fines imposed by the state," he said.

But state Environment Secretary Ron Curry said poor environmental management at LANL, not lack of funding, is the root of cleanup delays and state fines.

Curry said the state does not intend to

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renegotiate the so-called consent order, a legally binding agreement that requires the U.S. Department of Energy to investigate and clean up decades worth of contamination across the lab's 40-square-mile property by 2015.

Signed in 2005, the order lays out cleanup milestones and requires the federal government to pay fines if LANL fails to meet them. The state has so far fined LANL \$240,000 for consent order violations, according to the Environment Department.

"Those penalties have arisen because of a lack of proper environmental management and a lack of embracing the order by the people in charge of environmental cleanup for (LANL contractor Los Alamos National Security)," Curry said.

Lab spokesman James Rickman declined to comment on funding issues or the root causes of the cleanup delays, but he said that LANL remains committed to the consent order.

"We will continue to try our best to meet all future consent order requirements and milestones," he said.

The Bush administration is requesting \$140 million in its fiscal year 2008 budget for LANL cleanup. Domenici called that amount, similar to 2007 funding levels, insufficient.

Domenici said that he met with Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman to discuss LANL's cleanup situation and funding. Bodman acknowledged the problem and said he would instruct DOE officials to meet with state officials "to try to set new clean-up responsibilities that are consistent with realistic budget requests," according to Domenici.

Reached by phone late Monday, DOE

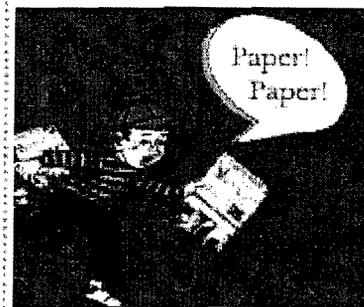
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spokeswoman Megan Barnett could not confirm Domenici's characterization of his discussions with Bodman, but she said that LANL's cleanup program "has faced technical and efficiency challenges and contractor performance issues."

"We are committed to working with state regulators to get cleanup progress back on track," she said.

Domenici plans to address LANL cleanup during a congressional budget hearing on Wednesday.

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