

Permit (Draft Order)

NEWSPAPER/JOURNAL	DATE:
ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL	May 3, 2002
North Edition	Page 1 of 2

State Orders LANL To Clean Up Dumps

By Jennifer McKee

It's official. Old industrial dumps, discarded high explosives, solvents and other dangerous waste either dumped or stored at Los Alamos National Laboratory in the last 59 years may pose "an imminent and substantial endangerment to human health and the environment."

That determination, formally signed by Environment Department Secretary Pete Maggiore on Thursday morning, paved the way for the most comprehensive environmental cleanup order the department has ever issued to Los Alamos lab and one of the most extensive environmental orders ever issued in the state's history.

A draft of the 300-page order was issued Thursday and is available for a 60-day public comment period before becoming final.

Just what the laboratory thought of the situation remained unknown. Lab officials did not attend the Environment Department's unveiling of the order Thursday, nor did they return phone calls seeking comment.

The order addresses all hazardous waste either dumped or stored at the lab since it opened as a secret Army project in 1943. The order first forces the lab to launch a broad investigation of its property — from topsoil to canyon bottoms — to determine just what kind of contamination is out there and where it is.

The plan lays out specifics for what the lab must look for and what kind of analysis it must conduct to find it. It instructs the lab to look in very deep ground water, shallower ground water and streams for pollution, as well as soils. In addition, the lab must pay special attention to pollution of canyons, which, in addition to draining to the Rio Grande, are also home to some of the lab's old dump sites and most contaminated areas.

Based on that investigation, the lab will have to clean up polluted areas to standards set by the Environment Department, said James Bearzi, chief of NMED's Environment Department.

The plan specifically addresses some of the lab's most well-known contaminated places, like Technical Area 54, home to the lab's nuclear and former hazardous waste dump since the 1950s.

Just when actual cleanup would begin was not pinned down Thursday. The order lays out a very specific schedule for when certain monitoring must be completed, with some deadlines as early as this spring and the latest scheduled for 2011. Actual cleanup would begin when the investigation is over, Bearzi said, and would vary from place to place.

The order forces the cleanup of hazardous wastes, like chemicals, and hazardous wastes mixed with radioactive waste. It also calls for the monitoring of some purely radioactive waste. By federal law, the state does not have jurisdiction over purely radioactive waste, and the plan does not address the cleanup of places contaminated with just radioactive waste.

The Energy Department has already begun a major cleanup at LANL, said Tracy Loughead, a DOE spokeswoman in Albuquerque. But based on current funding levels, DOE would take between 30 and 40 years to clean up everything and would not be required to clean it up to the Environment Department's standards.

It's just that inertia that prompted the Environment Department to issue the order, Maggiore said.

Many other states that are also home to Energy Department nuclear facilities have already issued such cleanup orders.

According to both Maggiore and Loughead, those states receive far more money for cleanup activities than New Mexico, which has never forced a DOE site to clean up. The Energy Department allocated five times more cleanup money for Idaho next year, for example, than New Mexico. Idaho has mandated that its DOE site, a former home for retired naval nuclear reactors, clean up and contain its wastes.

Maggiore said this mandate should give Los Alamos lab some leverage when asking for cleanup money in the future.



NEWSPAPER/JOURNAL	DATE:
ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL	May 3, 2002
North Edition	Page 2 of 2

The lab won't be required to clean up everything, Bearzi said. In some cases, removing all contamination may be impossible. But the lab would be required to keep its pollution from spreading.

The department has been working on the order since 1999, Bearzi said. The last 18 months have been especially busy.

Loughead said the order could bring more cleanup money to the lab.

"Certainly, it will make us take a good, long look at what we'll actually need to meet it," she said.