

High Country News - Letters to the Editor
Dec. 22, 2003

Story was biased against Los Alamos

Laura Paskus' one-sided article, "New Mexico goes head-to-head with a nuclear juggernaut," has largely parroted the viewpoint of the local anti-LANL (Los Alamos National Laboratory) organizations (HCN, 11/24/03: New Mexico goes head-to-head with a nuclear juggernaut). I am a LANL employee, although the opinions expressed here are my own.

The problems with this article begin in the first paragraphs, in which Paskus presents a highly skewed background description of Los Alamos, designed to present it as a dark and repressive place. With statements like "lab employees can, to some degree, express their personal politics," she insinuates that dissent is discouraged. In fact, Lab employees enjoy more freedom to express personal politics than is commonly seen in private industry (where I also spent many years employed) — probably a result of LANL's heritage of being run by the University of California.

Although most of the facts Paskus quotes are technically correct, many are half-truths presented without background or qualification. For instance, she quotes the recent report by the Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety (a local anti-LANL group) "showing that cesium-137 has reached the Rio Grande," without mentioning that the levels detected are at the ragged edge of the minimum detectable with the test used, and that even if accurate, these levels are consistent with those resulting from worldwide radioactive fallout from nuclear testing in the 1950s and early 1960s. Further, in describing LANL's new Biosafety Level 3 Facility, Paskus leaves the impression that LANL is developing bioweapons. This is not true — one of the missions is to examine defenses AGAINST terrorist bioweapons.

Paskus makes a half-hearted effort to present both sides of the issues discussed, but commonly quotes anti-LANL viewpoints as fact while quoting LANL representatives in such a way as to insinuate they are lying or hiding something. Her article falls far short of the well-researched, fair and unbiased coverage of environmental issues that used to be the standard for High Country News.

Blake P. Wood
Los Alamos, New Mexico

A disappointing story on Los Alamos

I write in response to your cover story on Los Alamos National Laboratory's waste-cleanup practices (HCN, 11/24/03: New Mexico goes head-to-head with a nuclear juggernaut). I was most interested in how you would approach the subject, being a subscriber to HCN and a great fan for roughly a decade, a conservation activist in northern New Mexico, and a research scientist at the laboratory. (These comments are my own opinions, of course, not official positions of the laboratory.)

I am crushingly disappointed at the results. LANL indeed has some serious environmental problems and should devote considerable resources to fixing them. There have been major goofs that demand restorative action. But that is precisely why LANL is the largest environmental science organization in the Southwestern United States. Your blanket dismissal of a program that spends \$45 million per year is little more than journalistic smugness.

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There are three fundamental failures in HCN's analysis. The first is that you failed to consider whether the levels of contaminants detected in soil, groundwater, and air are large enough to be threats to human health or wildlife. Had you asked, you would have found that there are no imminent threats to New Mexico communities at all, if one uses as a standard the EPA exposure limits.

The second fundamental flaw in your analysis was an apparent presumption that everything stated by Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety and the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) was unimpeachably correct, and that any conflict with lab statements must automatically be resolved in favor of the critics. Every assertion in this business must be scrutinized, not just those from the institution you view as the bad guys.

The statement that contamination is "poised to move from Rio Grande toward Buckman Wells" is an extremely problematic statement. Only one canyon (Los Alamos/Pueblo) empties into the Rio Grande above the Buckman Wells. The contaminants in Los Alamos canyon have been extensively documented, and the future likelihood of impairing drinking water is remote indeed. NMED staff may choose to disagree, of course, but they have yet to provide a scientifically convincing argument to the contrary.

Finally, you ignored the historical aspect of contamination problems. An unwary reader of your article might conclude that LANL continued to pollute its environment until very recently.

I hope you will consider follow-up work here to inform your readership the way they deserve and have come to expect of you.

Bernard Foy
Santa Fe, New Mexico