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GROUNDWATER MONITORING UPDATE: TRACE AMOUNTS OF PERCHLORATE IN MORTANDAD CANYON MONITORING WELL

LOS ALAMOS, NM, Feb. 26, 2004 – Los Alamos National Laboratory officials announced today that, as part of ongoing monitoring efforts, they have found trace amounts of perchlorate in aquifer samples taken from a monitoring well in Mortandad Canyon. The well, R-15, does not supply drinking water. Samples showed a perchlorate concentration of 4.8 parts per billion (ppb); the laboratory reported similar concentrations of perchlorate in the R-15 well in 2001. While the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has not set a drinking water standard for perchlorate, it has provided a preliminary goal range of 4-18 ppb.

“The laboratory will pursue the most recent detection at R-15 with increased action, including additional sampling for perchlorate and construction of approximately 20 new wells in Mortandad Canyon this year, as approved by the New Mexico Environment Department,” said Charles Nylander, manager for the laboratory’s Groundwater Protection Program. “This additional work will better define the nature and extent of groundwater contamination in Mortandad Canyon, and provide the foundation for any remediation that may be needed.”

This latest finding follows other detections of perchlorate in groundwater in recent years as reported by the Laboratory, NMED and the EPA, including trace levels of perchlorate in drinking water systems in various locations around New Mexico. Those results appeared to indicate that low levels of perchlorate, approximately one-quarter of a part per billion, might exist widely in the state’s groundwater systems. The sources for such widespread perchlorate are not fully known.

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The source of the Mortandad Canyon perchlorate is believed to be from infiltration and percolation of historic effluent discharges from a permitted, industrial wastewater treatment facility located at TA-50. In 2002, the laboratory installed a new treatment system designed specifically to remove perchlorate from the effluent discharges; since that time, perchlorate has not been detected in those discharges.

During the late 1990s, the Environmental Protection Agency identified perchlorate as a contaminant of concern, although the chemical is not regulated under the federal Safe Drinking Water Act or New Mexico drinking-water regulations.

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