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For Immediate Release

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State Environment Secretary Approves First Groundwater Clean Up Plan at LANL

(Santa Fe, NM) – New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) Secretary Ron Curry recently approved a plan for the clean up of shallow groundwater contamination in Cañon de Valle at Los Alamos National Laboratory that resulted from the discharge of wastewater from an explosives processing site. The clean up is the first of several required in the fence-to-fence cleanup Consent Order.

The plan, approved by Secretary Curry on Oct. 30, will allow for the clean up of contamination in shallow groundwater, soil, rock, and sediment in Cañon de Valle. The contamination resulted from millions of gallons of contaminated wastewater discharged to the canyon during explosives processing operations at Building 260 at TA-16. The contaminated groundwater subject to this cleanup is not part of the regional aquifer, which is the drinking water source for local residents.

“This groundwater clean up effort is the first of many required by the Order on Consent,” said NMED Secretary Ron Curry. “The remedy I approved for the lab will require LANL to clean up existing contamination in the shallow aquifer and prevent contaminants from seeping into the regional aquifer that provides drinking water for local residents. Protecting the regional drinking water will also help to keep Los Alamos County a viable and economically-developing community.”

“The clean up effort, which will restore groundwater quality, is timely considering Gov. Richardson declared the 2007 legislative session the Year of Water,” Curry said. “The lab lags far behind other DOE facilities in groundwater clean up programs. The Consent Order makes the lab responsible for groundwater protection, including timely remediation of its contamination.”

Wastewater from past and present operations at Building 260 included explosive compounds, solvents, and metals, including barium. Samples from sediment showed barium ranging from 34.9 parts per million (ppm) to 3,900 ppm in Cañon de Valle and 1,700 ppm in Martin Spring Canyon. Samples from bedrock at the outfall in Cañon de Valle showed the explosive compound RDX at 4,500 ppm, the explosive compound HMX at 1,700 ppm and TNT at 3,500 ppm. Samples collected in Cañon de Valle also revealed barium at levels up to 1,310 parts per billion (ppb) in spring water, up to 16,300 ppb in surface water, and up to 18,000 ppb in groundwater. Although there are no risks to human health or the environment from that contamination, studies showed a clean up is necessary to protect the regional drinking water from potential contamination.

The lab must submit an implementation plan to NMED within six months that explains the details of the clean up plan. The lab’s clean up process involves injecting grout into cracks in rock in the canyon and placing three barriers into the Cañon de Valle and a fourth in Martin Spring Canyon. The barriers will remove contamination from the water and prevent those contaminants from seeping into deeper groundwater.

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The State of New Mexico entered into a historic agreement with LANL in March 2001 that dictates how and when cleanup will occur at LANL. The Consent Order is enforceable by the state, and includes substantial penalties for noncompliance.

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