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Plan Would Close Lab's Waste Dump

By **John Fleck**
Journal Staff Writer

Los Alamos National Laboratory would have to close its low-level radioactive waste dump under a proposal issued Monday by the state Environment Department.

But the state does not have the regulatory authority to prevent the lab from opening a new radioactive waste dump next to the old one, said James Bearzi, head of the Environment Department's Hazardous Waste Bureau.

The proposal sets the stage for a potentially bruising fight over whether the waste buried at the old dump needs to be removed, or whether it can safely be left where it is.

The Environment Department proposal requires the lab to "implement a cleanup plan that would protect human health and the environment," according to the department's summary of its 1,500-page proposal.

But whether leaving the waste where it is meets that test, or whether it will need to be dug up and moved to a safer place, remains to be seen, Bearzi said in a telephone interview Monday.

The proposal issued Monday would require Los Alamos to study both options, with a final decision up to the state, Bearzi said.

The dump, known in lab parlance as "Area G," holds half a century's worth of radioactive trash generated in nuclear weapons design and manufacturing at Los Alamos.

The state has no legal regulatory authority over radioactive waste. But the dump also contains other types of hazardous waste governed by state law. That gives the state the legal leverage over the old landfill.

A new disposal area proposed next door to the old dump would only contain radioactive waste, so the state has no legal authority over it, Bearzi said.

The lab and the Department of Energy, the federal agency that owns Los Alamos, argue that Area G poses no danger to public health and the environment.

Activists have vehemently disagreed with the lab over the question for years.

Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch New Mexico praised the Environment



Department's efforts to get a handle on the situation at Area G and other similar sites governed by the proposal issued Monday.

But Coghlan said the state needs to make sure the dump's closure includes removing the waste.

"Citizens still need to push for comprehensive cleanup so that groundwater and the Rio Grande are permanently protected," he said.

The proposal to close Area G is part of a broad rewrite of the current jodgepodge of procedures for handling hazardous waste at Los Alamos.

Lab officials said they are only beginning to review the massive document and declined detailed comment, spokesman Kevin Roark said.

But Roark added that the proposal would provide useful clarification to the hazardous waste rules at Los Alamos.

Members of the public have 60 days to comment to the Environment Department on the proposal.

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Input sought on lab waste permit

The state Environment Department seeks public input on a draft hazardous waste permit for Los Alamos National Laboratory. The public is invited to comment on this and other aspects of the lab's pending hazardous waste permit with the state until 5 p.m. Oct. 26.

The state regulates chemical waste and mixed waste at the lab, and the U.S. Department of Energy regulates radioactive waste. The permit would cover 27 waste management units, or dumps, on the historic lab's property, and the pending closure of three dumps, including an old part of Area G.

To comment or see the draft permit, go to www.nmenv.state.nm.us/HWB/lanlperm.html.

For more information, call James Bearzi at 476-6016 or Marissa Stone at 827-0314. The draft permit may also be viewed by appointment. Also, members of the public may request a hearing on these issues.