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Agency asks to burn lab's nuclear waste

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The New Mexican Staff

Low-level radioactive waste produced at Los Alamos National Laboratory and buried should be burned instead, says the U.S. Department of Energy.

The process for disposal will be determined in coming months by the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Division, which has two separate applications from the Energy Department before it.

An application submitted May 3 calls for construction of a \$3 million incinerator that within five years could burn 3½ million pounds of low-level radioactive garbage annually.

The actual amount burned likely would be far less than that, Energy Department and Espanola lab officials said Wednesday.

EID officials said a moratorium included in a waste-incineration bill passed by the Legislature this year would block such a new incinerator from being used until regulations called for by the legislation are approved.

They suggested there might not be a great rush to write such regulations.

The Energy Department already has a smaller incinerator in Los Alamos that could be used to burn low-level radioactive waste. The incinerator has an interim permit from the federal Environmental Protection Agency, but the state EID on July 13 will have a public hearing that could affect use of the existing incinerator.

The EID has until November to decide whether the smaller incinerator and other lab components affected by the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act are to be granted a hazardous-waste permit, said Donna Lacombe, an environmental scientist with the Energy Department's area office in Los Alamos.

Lacombe said the incinerator was put through a test burn two

years ago and that all state requirements were met. But the incinerator has not been used in the past two years.

It is undergoing improvements that "have nothing to do with the EID," Lacombe said.

Ken Hargis, group leader with the lab's environmental-surveillance group, said the proposed new incinerator would pose no threat to health or safety.

"It is designed with multiple, multiple controls," Hargis said. He said there would be "a lot of types of potential emissions" from the incinerator.

"But under all conditions, the incinerator would comply with requirements," he said.

Hargis said only wastes from the lab would be burned at the new incinerator.

But nothing could be burned until radioactive- and hazardous-waste regulations required by a 1989 bill sponsored by Rep. Max Coll, D-Santa Fe, are written and adopted, said Robert Kirkpatrick, an EID engineer.

"There's some question whether we should proceed with processing the application because we are still in the process of developing regulations," he said.

Bill Blankenship, an environmental specialist with EID, has been assigned to write regulations required by Coll's bill. But he has worked full time on regulations affecting only incineration of municipal wastes. Those regulations are likely to be adopted by the end of this year, Blankenship said.

He said other work is piling up and regulations for radioactive waste might have to be put off.

"Perhaps we just let the moratorium stay in effect," he said. "The moratorium is sort of a safety device. If we didn't have it, we'd be scrambling tremendously right now to get something in place before a permit is issued."

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