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Letters should be addressed to: Journal North Letters, 328 Galisteo St., Santa Fe, NM 87501.

Incineration Bodes Environmental Disaster

By Silvi Solomon

Incineration is a powerful tool for radioactive dumping. If Los Alamos National Laboratories persists in its plan to fire up two incinerators to burn chemical wastes mixed with radioactive materials, we will all pay the price in increased cancers and birth defects. No doubt about it!

Plutonium is the main radioactive ingredient in the waste and it won't be changed by fire: it will just get going faster, flying away into the wind, coming closer and closer to you and me.

Wherever it lands plutonium will send out alpha particles for 250,000 years because that's the time it takes for plutonium to decay and lose its explosive energy. Although it can't enter the body through the skin, it's easy enough to get inside us through the air we breathe and the food we eat and drink. Once inside, an alpha particle acts like a



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bull in a china shop, tearing apart molecules held together by only small amounts of energy. It knocks electrons from their orbits in stable atoms, super-charging them. These

newly excited electrons then crash into other atoms, thus causing more and more disorder.

When it smashes a DNA molecule, a cell may stop working right and begin growing without the controlling messages of a normal cell. In time, we call this cancer. When radioactivity destroys the DNA in an egg or sperm cell, a child may be born with missing or underdeveloped parts, including mental retardation. Even if the children seem normal, they may carry damaged genes which cause birth defects in their children.

Now all that stands between us living as usual or living with the added stresses of more and more plutonium all around us is a small bunch of bureaucrats at the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Division. They plan to grant a permit to the Los Alamos Lab to begin burning hazardous chemicals in two separate incinerators on lab premises. These incinerators are designed to also burn radioactive materials. Meanwhile, C. Kelly

Crossman, who supervises the paperwork, announced public hearings on the lab's permit for July 18. The radioactive materials already mixed with the chemicals will not be considered at the July 18 hearings — only hazardous chemical wastes are to be discussed.

There is the distinct possibility that the hearing process is being carefully managed so as to minimize local public input. This is insulting to the people of Northern New Mexico as well as to the democratic process. Anyone who feels strongly about protecting his own health and safety would do well to call Crossman at 827-2929 or write him at the Runnels Building, 1190 St. Francis Drive, 87503, asking him to postpone public hearings until they can allow free and open discussion to occur.

If we let it happen, we deserve what we get!

Solomon is a Santa Fe environmental lobbyist, black belt in Aikido and mother of two children.