

Inside Story

The Next Environmental Battleground

It's an incinerator for radioactive wastes at Los Alamos.

By Keith Easthouse

For eight years, from 1979 to 1987, radioactive waste was incinerated at Los Alamos National Laboratory with little public knowledge and little state monitoring.

Now the lab wants to start the burning again. This time it is facing public opposition, and at least some state regulation.

The \$3.6 million incinerator is scheduled to fire up its ovens in six months and burn what it did before: plutonium-contaminated boots, gloves and the like, as well as material tainted with toxic chemicals.

The lab scientists interviewed this week say the incinerator poses no hazard to public health—that the amount of radioactivity released into the atmosphere, and carried on the winds to Santa Fe, is minimal. But many citizens, particularly those in Santa Fe, are unconvinced.

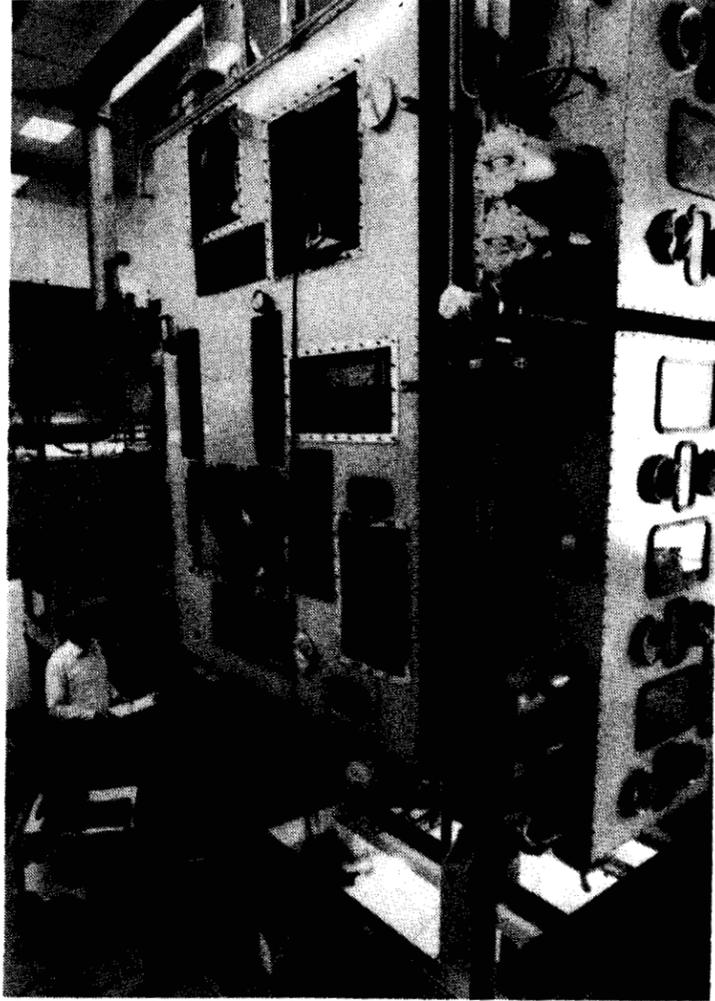
As one person, who asked not to be identified, said: "This is much more serious than WIPP. If there's an accident, how do we clean the air?"

Even without an accidental release, some people think there is a danger because traces of plutonium may routinely escape from the incinerator's smokestacks. Plutonium remains radioactive for 240,000 years and is lethal even in very small doses when inhaled. Some also fear effects from the burning of non-radioactive hazardous chemicals.

"We just don't think incineration is the right way to deal with plutonium or toxics," Elizabeth Billups, of Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, said.

CCNS and others feel frustrated because the state, the only entity capable of stopping the reopening of the incinerator, or at least delaying it, is so far showing little inclination to do either.

"Unless something comes out of the woodwork, I don't see any valid public health reason that this incinerator shouldn't open," C. Kelley Crossman, of the state En-



Worker checks Los Alamos incinerator.

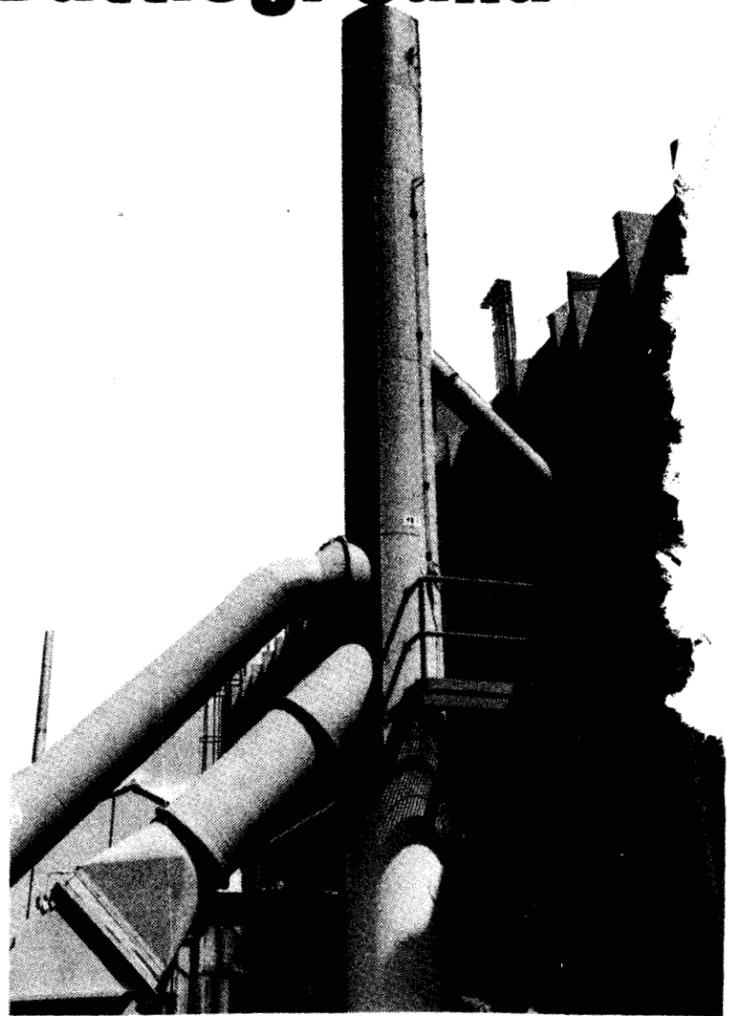
vironmental Improvement Division's hazardous waste bureau, said.

State permission was not an issue when the incinerator was operating before. That is because state regulatory laws on hazardous waste incinerators had not yet been developed. Back then, the lab was essentially regulating the incinerator itself. The state merely reviewed the lab's own reports.

According to lab scientists, the incinerator, known as a controlled air incinerator, is a state-of-the-art facility that releases radioactivity

into the environment in such small amounts that it is harmless. The incinerator was voluntarily shut down by the lab two years ago to replace worn-out parts.

"The amount of radioactivity that the incinerator releases in a year is well below the amount of radioactivity a single person receives from a chest X-ray," Ken Hargis, of the lab's waste management division, said. Hargis said that "99.999 percent" of the radioactive particles end up in the ash produced by the incinerator, or in the incinerator's sophisticated



The smokestack.

STEVE NORTHUP



filter system. The incinerator ash is among the materials that are supposed to be buried at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant at Carlsbad if and when it opens.

No Data on Health Risks

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, there are 14 mixed-waste incinerators in operation around the country. No health studies have been done regarding any effects of these incinerators on the surrounding populations, an EPA spokesman said.

Hargis said the Los Alamos in-

cinerator is very small, capable of burning only 100 to 125 pounds of solid waste per hour. In contrast, commercial hazardous waste incinerators burn tons of toxic material per hour.

"We're not going to be up here burning huge amounts of radioactive material," Hargis said. "It won't even be burning all the time. There'll be stretches when it will

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Robert Mayer is on vacation. His column, "Santa Fe Blues," will resume shortly.

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Incinerator

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be quiet and not be incinerating anything at all."

Despite such assurances, about 50 letters have poured into the offices of the state Environmental Improvement Division since it was announced last month that EID would hold a public hearing on the incinerator July 18 at the Harold Runnels Building on St. Francis Drive.

Such a response may be a testament to the heightened awareness of radioactive waste in the wake of the WIPP controversy. In the past, few expressed concern about the incinerator, or were even aware of its existence.

But the letters clearly represent something else: dissatisfaction with the way EID plans to run the hearing.

State Lacks Controls

The purpose of the hearing, according to Crossman of EID, is to get public input on whether the state should give the lab a permit to burn toxic chemicals. It is not, Crossman said, about whether the lab should have a permit to burn radioactive materials, because the state does not yet have the authority to grant such a permit.

"I can tell you now that the hearing officer won't allow discussion of radioactive incineration," Crossman warned. "That's not what this hearing is about."

Crossman said radioactive incineration would be discussed at a later hearing, probably sometime next year. That is when the state expects to receive authority from the Environmental Protection Agency to give permit approval for incinerators that burn both radioactive and chemical waste. New Mexico is only one of six states that currently do not have such power.

"Our application [for such authority] is in, but the EPA just hasn't acted on it yet," Crossman said.

Because participants in the hearing will not be allowed to talk about their main concern—radioactive incineration—some have called for the hearing to be delayed.

"We shouldn't even be having hearings on this [the incinerator] until all the state regulations are in place," Billups, of CCNS, said. "This is absurd."

Billups also argued that giving the incinerator a state permit would violate the spirit of a moratorium on hazardous waste incinerators passed by the Legislature. The moratorium doesn't apply to the Los Alamos incinerator because the law exempts incinerators that have already been built.

When asked for an alternative to incinerating radioactive waste, Billups cited "super compaction." She said it is cheaper, safer and accomplishes the same goal as incineration: reduction of volume.

Any alternative would be preferable, according to people like Michael Kaye. Kaye owns six acres of land 20 miles due east, and downwind, of the lab.

"This is horrible," Kaye said. "I came out here from L.A. to get away from the smog, and now I find out about this. It's like trouble in paradise."

His wife, Carrie Kaye, added: "It makes me sick. I don't want to be an alarmist, but my reaction is that we have to sell our land quick and get out."

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