

Incinerator Safe, Lab Says

Los Alamos Burner Designed For Radioactive Wastes

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SANTA FE — Los Alamos National Laboratory officials are confident that a waste incinerator now under state review is safe, despite concerns of Northern New Mexico groups about the burning of radioactive materials.

"When it's operating, if you want a publicity shot, I'll stand up there on the stack and snort the discharge," said David Hutchins, project leader for chemical waste incineration. "I'm that convinced."

And John Vavruska, project leader for radioactive waste incineration, says, "I've got integrity; I live in Santa Fe and I've got a 2-year-old daughter. I wouldn't be working on it if I didn't think it was going to work."

The state's Environmental Improvement Division on July 18 will consider an application from the U.S. Department of Energy for final state approval of the incinerator at the laboratory.

The energy department plans to

use the incinerator primarily to reduce its volume of radioactive waste, which the lab hopes to ship to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad.

However, the state hearing will only consider whether the plant meets federal standards for incinerating chemical, non-radioactive material. The federal government will consider standards for radioactive emissions.

C. Kelley Crossman, supervisor of the state's Hazardous Waste Bureau, said Friday it's not a foregone conclusion that the state will approve the permit. However, he said, "If I have any indication it was not going to meet the standards, it never would have got this far; I would have recommended permit denial."

Environmentalists intend to protest the incinerator at the hearing, which begins at 9 a.m. Tuesday in the auditorium of the Harold Runnels Building in Santa Fe.

Vavruska, lab project leader, said Los Alamos National Laboratory has generated 35 to 100 cubic

meters a year of transuranic waste — items contaminated with highly radioactive material. The material currently is stored at the lab site.

Hutchins said most of the transuranic waste is easily burned items such as paper, rags and gloves. He said the incineration reduces the volume of such waste by about 100 times.

The DOE has similar low-level waste incinerators at Idaho Falls and near the Savannah River Plant in South Carolina. Hutchins and Vavruska said federal regulators are leaning increasingly toward incineration as a way to cut the volume of waste stockpiled around the country.

Vavruska said he's not aware of any plans to accept waste from any other parts of the country for burning in Los Alamos.

Tuesday's hearing isn't limited to the incinerator question. Hutchins said the state is considering whether to give final approval to the entire lab's provisional permission to handle non-radioactive hazardous waste in all its operations.



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