

LANL plant leaks fluid, state finds

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A state hydrologist said there is "no question" leaks have occurred beneath the facility.

Los Alamos National Laboratory's radioactive waste-water treatment plant is leaking contaminants, possibly in violation of state law, a top official with the New Mexico Environment Department said Wednesday.

In a two-page letter to top laboratory officials, Kathleen Sisneros, director of the department's Water and Waste Management Division, said "an unauthorized discharge of water contaminants" is taking place at the facility, located on a mesa at the laboratory's Technical Area 50.

Sisneros cited seepage from tanks at the facility as the source of the leak. She urged the laboratory to undertake an investigation "without delay."

John Gustafson, a laboratory spokesman, said a small seepage is occurring in a treatment tank inside the facility. He said there is no evidence that contamination from the tank has migrated from the facility into the environment.

Gustafson said two projects addressing the treatment plant are under way. One is intended to upgrade the plant, built in 1963, at a cost of \$8 million. The other is looking at whether the area surrounding and underlying the plant has been contaminated.

Among the contaminants that are separated from liquid waste water at the plant is plutonium, a hazardous radioactive metal that remains in the environment for

240,000 years.

In her letter, Sisneros proposed that state and laboratory officials meet to discuss the situation. A date has not been set.

In a three-page letter to Environment Department Secretary Judith Espinosa last month, Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, a Santa Fe watchdog group, charged that the facility was in violation of state water quality laws and called upon Espinosa to take action.

John Geddie, a spokesman with the Environment Department, said the state's concern about the treatment plant was triggered by a description of the plant's shortcomings in a laboratory document released earlier this year.

The document, called The Capital Assets Management Process, or CAMP, lists the following problems:

■ Treatment tanks at the facility are leaking.

"The design life of the concrete tankage has virtually expired and seepage is occurring

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through the tank walls," the document said.

■ The 31-year-old plant does not meet modern worker safety and environmental standards.

■ Performing maintenance work at the facility is difficult and dangerous because work areas are crowded with equipment.

The laboratory wants to build a new plant at a cost of \$137 million, but it is not clear whether the Department of Energy will fund it. If funding is provided, the new facility would not be ready until 2003 at the earliest.

The existing plant, linked by a network of pipes to buildings throughout the laboratory that produce liquid radioactive waste.

is critical to laboratory operations.

"The facility supports several major programs at Los Alamos National Laboratory. Should operation of the facility cease, these programs could not continue to generate radioactive liquid waste, thereby severely impacting operations," the CAMP document said.

The upgrade project, which should be largely completed by the fall of 1995, includes replacing underground storage tanks with above-ground vessels, Gustafson said. It also involves lining the treatment tanks inside the facility — including those that have developed seepage — with stainless steel to provide added containment.

Gustafson said a separate project involves drilling underneath the site to determine the extent of contamination, if any.

Steve Hanson, group leader of the lab's radioactive and industrial waste water science group, said it will not be clear whether contaminants have entered the environment from the facility until the drilling is further along.

Michael Dale, a hydrologist with the state, said there is "no question" leaks have occurred beneath the facility.

There has been one identified leak at the plant, in August 1990, which lab officials said at the time contaminated dirt beneath the plant.

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