

Bento Garcia / File



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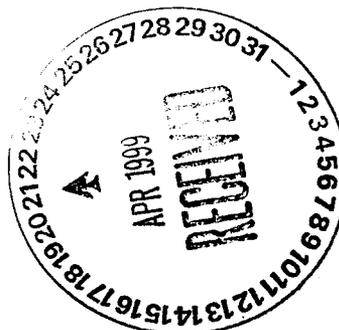


PETER MAGGIORE
Secretary

1A-51

April 19, 1999

Elizabeth Withers
NEPA Compliance Officer
Los Alamos Area Office
528 35th Street
MS-A316
Los Alamos, N.M. 87544



Dear Ms. Withers:

RE: DECONTAMINATION AND VOLUME REDUCTION SYSTEM FOR TRANSURANIC WASTE AT LOS ALAMOS NATIONAL LABORATORY, LOS ALAMOS, NEW MEXICO, DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT; DOE-EA-1269; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY, LOS ALAMOS AREA OFFICE; MARCH 23, 1999

This transmits New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) staff comments concerning the above-referenced Draft Environmental Assessment (DEA).

1. The proposed action of "decontamination and volume reduction" of transuranic waste (TRU) waste, will, in fact, result in an overall increase in radioactive waste volume by 2,485 yd³ in the form of "secondarily radioactive solid wastes" generated by the decontamination process (Section 3.2 Waste Management). Also, depending on the level of contamination, this could result in the production of 1.4 yd³ of TRU or mixed waste for every yd³ of TRU waste processed. Effectively, it appears that the sole purpose of the proposal is to reclassify TRU wastes as LLW by diluting the existing contamination by transferring it to water, cleaning solutions, rags, brushes, and HEPA filters, etc.

The "dilution" of TRU contaminants on the surface of any article or item designated for disposal at WIPP, artificially removes the item from the WIPP inventory and allows disposal of TRU contaminants in a surface disposal unit or units at LANL without the long term disposal safeguards set at the WIPP site. Although reclassified as "low level waste" through the proposed process, the characteristics of the TRU contaminants remain the same as the characteristics of the waste originally destined for the WIPP site. The safeguards for disposal of TRU wastes should be the same at any site proposed for the disposal of TRU wastes. The cutoff establishing a "low level" category for disposal through a 99 pCi/gm level extrapolated from surficial exposure readings or removable material determinations does not completely address the issue of total TRU inventory to be disposed of in a near surface disposal site.



2. The proposed long term disposal of transuranic wastes, presumably primarily in the form of isotopic plutonium, at Los Alamos Area G does not seem to be appropriate since the WIPP site was designed and built specifically to store and dispose of these wastes under the EPA requirements and standards of 40CFR191 and 40CFR194. The DEA appears to take into account only cost savings relative to transportation costs to the WIPP site. The long term costs for care and maintenance and possible threats to the environment and potential public health impacts from future potential TRU releases or migrations from the near surface disposal areas should be factored into the decision making process. This proposal appears to circumvent, without justification, the goal to dispose of TRU wastes at WIPP.

3. Within Section 1.3 Purpose and Need for DOE Action, it is concluded that in order to deal effectively with management and WIPP disposal of the existing and anticipated inventory of oversized, metallic TRU waste at LANL, the facility should implement an efficient waste size reduction system. This is not, however, the basis for the proposed action, nor is it addressed in any of the considered alternatives. The DVRS proposes to reduce the volume of waste, through compaction, whether or not it is destined for disposal at WIPP or LANL. For this reason, if no other, it makes sense to forego the decontamination steps which will place workers at increased exposure risk, contrary to ALARA requirements, and package and transport the compacted TRU wastes to WIPP for long term disposal.

4. The low level waste disposal sites proposed for the TRU waste disposal at LANL have not been addressed in this DEA in terms of design and containment specific to TRU constituents in the near surface disposal areas of TA-54. Conclusions that the "no action alternative" (NAA) will result in greater environmental and human health risks are based on the fallacious assumption that the NAA always implies indefinite onsite storage. Within the cited DOE Record of Decision, cited and supporting documentation, and the DEA itself, the anticipated completion time for WIPP disposal of all TRU wastes under the NAA is 17 years.

5. The statements that existing plywood storage containers are "old", "exhibiting noticeable effects from weathering" and that in the future "wastes could be directly exposed to the elements," implying that the waste boxes are still being subject to "long-term exposure to the weather," are false and misleading. The containers are, in fact, being stored in Dome 230, one of the facilities proposed for use in the DVRS specifically because it is designed to meet the comprehensive performance goals and environmental protection standards "specified in DOE-STD-1020-92".

6. DOE is still in the initial stages of evaluating and modeling the hydrogeologic situation at LANL. As such, the environmental impacts of the proposed action and waste disposal at Area G are with respect to groundwater, currently unsupported declarations. Disposal at WIPP for this same waste, however, has been studied, evaluated, and certified to provide indefinite protection for human health and the environment.

7. The DEA does not address the approach and specific methodology to be utilized by LANL to characterize the proposed waste stream to ascertain that there is no RCRA regulated mixed waste which could be land disposed at LANL. As NMED understands the statutory and regulatory requirement for mixed waste, to include TRU mixed waste, the land ban restrictions on mixed waste would still be applicable to near surface disposal at LANL.

Elizabeth Withers
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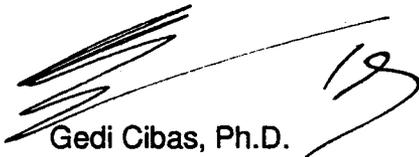
8. The DEA makes unsupported claims of "achieving substantial cost savings." It is not clear where these cost savings will be realized without providing cost comparisons. Also, comparisons are made with respect to volumes of waste and waste reductions only in a narrative format. A table or tables providing for direct comparison of the proposed action and all the considered alternatives would be helpful.

9. Other than removing "lead components" (Page 10, second paragraph), there is no discussion of the basis for hazardous waste determinations of the resulting waste.

10. Section 2.1.6 Future Uses of the DVRS defers discussion of the final disposition of the DVRS to a subsequent NEPA review. It would be prudent, however, to provide a volume and cost associated with all alternatives, including "processed into LLW and disposed of on-site."

We appreciate the opportunity to review this document, please let us know if you have any questions on the above.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gedi Cibas", with a large, stylized flourish extending from the end of the signature.

Gedi Cibas, Ph.D.
Environmental Impact Review Coordinator

NMED File No. 1260ER