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TA-54
4 January 2002

The Honorable Spencer Abraham
Secretary of Energy
U.S. Department of Energy
1000 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20585



Dear Secretary Abraham:

Los Alamos National Laboratory continues to dispose of large quantities of radioactive waste in shallow pits and shafts in its "Area G" landfill near White Rock, New Mexico.

The waste interred at Area G is now buried, as it was in 1957, in shallow unlined pits and shafts. When the pits are nearly full, they are covered by about three feet of crushed volcanic tuff, a sand-like material; the shafts are topped off with a concrete plug. Most of the waste has little or no primary containment. There is no secondary containment, no cap, and no liner. The total inventory of chemical and nuclear waste at the site is unknown; its volume already exceeds the ultimate capacity of WIPP.

Area G is directly adjacent to springs and wetlands, and is both directly upstream and upwind from White Rock, NM. Surface water in Pajarito Canyon, immediately adjoining and topographically below the dump, has been used as a potable water supply from Anasazi times until the establishment of the lab, and the site is ringed with ancient pueblo ruins and grave sites. Shallow, as well as intermediate, aquifers are found beneath Pajarito and surrounding canyons. Groundwater is percolating downward from these aquifers to the regional aquifer below, to springs along the Rio Grande, and to public water supply wells, one of which is directly south of Area G. As you may know, analyses of public water supply wells in Los Alamos have begun to show evidence of contamination by man-made radionuclides such as tritium and strontium-90. A test well directly adjacent to Area G ("R-22") shows contamination of the regional aquifer by low levels of tritium and technetium-99. The site lithology is not the best, either: below the tuff, the rock consists largely of fractured basalt, which is highly unfavorable for retention and attenuation of contaminants, should they reach groundwater.

In sum, Area G's natural setting is not favorable for the disposal of nuclear waste. It is highly unlikely that Area G or for that matter, any chemical or nuclear waste disposal facility, could ever be permitted today at TA-54. The same is true for the rest of the



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Pajarito Plateau, which receives too much precipitation, is too dissected by canyons with streams, and is too permeable for the permitted disposal of chemical and long-lived nuclear wastes.

For many of these reasons, the New Mexico Attorney General's office wrote to the chief of the NMED Hazardous Waste Bureau, on July 12 of last year, asking him, among other requests, to close Area G. However, to date they have neither been closed nor permitted. In addition, the New Mexico Attorney General's office has asked the NMED to close the site.

I respectfully request that you close Area G to further disposal of nuclear waste. I request that the DOE hold formal public hearings on the required closure plan and subsequent cleanup and stabilization measures both for Area G, and for all other nuclear and chemical waste disposal sites in Los Alamos.

Sincerely,



Marsha Mason

MM/ap

cc: Tom Udall, U.S. House of Representatives
Pete Domenici, U.S. Senate
Jeff Bingaman, U.S. Senate
Harry Martinez, Governor, San Ildefonso Pueblo
Regis Pecos, Governor, Cochiti Pueblo
Rick Glass, Manager, DOE Albuquerque Operations Office
Richard Polanco, Majority Leader, California State Legislature
John Browne, Director, Los Alamos National Laboratory
James Bearzi, NMED Hazardous Waste Bureau Chief ✓