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TA-66 Key: Pajarito Canyon, Dam, Flood Retention Structure, Cerro Grande Fire

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Headline News

Dam could be left in Pajarito Canyon

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Nation

The Department of Energy has determined that it can decide what to do about the stopgap dam that was constructed almost two years ago in Pajarito Canyon. Pulling it out completely or partially, or leaving it all there, are considered more or less equivalent, environmentally-speaking, according to DOE's environmental assessment. Built several months after the Cerro Grande Fire, the multimillion dollar flood retention structure sparked controversy for its size, function and expense. The 80,000 cubic yards of concrete and rock that was anchored 50 feet into the canyon floor was called a flood retention structure, because it was designed to retain a torrent of water from a once-in-a-hundred-year flood, for a short period of time before releasing it.

As an emergency protection for nuclear materials and criticality machines downstream in Technical Area 18, the dam was deemed necessary by DOE and lab officials at the time. One unanswered question was how and to what extent the structure, and a complex of associated structures related to flood dangers, would be removed when they were no longer useful.

On Wednesday, Ralph Erickson, director of the Department of Energy's Office of Los Alamos Site Operations signed a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) concerning plans for future disposal of the dam. Nothing will be done until the conditions of the watershed upstream have returned to something approximating pre-fire conditions. This is estimated at three to eight more years, a somewhat longer period than had been estimated by the Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation Team. Drought conditions throughout the area have already delayed estimates of vegetative recovery in the watershed by at least a couple of years.

A final environmental assessment was issued at the same time as the FONSI providing the basis for concluding that there would be no appreciable difference in environmental impacts among the three major alternatives. The basic proposal calls for removal of most of the flood retention structure above ground level along with sufficient sediment to allow a free flow of water. But the potential



adverse effects of doing nothing is considered "minimal," the same as full removal.

The dam stretches 390 feet across the canyon. The proposal calls for a breach of about 200 feet, a little more than half the width. Some 54,400 cubic yards of concrete debris, accumulated sediment and rock would be hauled out of the canyon in 6-wheel-drive trucks, under the favored scenario. The removal route would depend on what happens to TA-18. The nuclear research, testing and training area located about a mile and a half downstream from the dam is awaiting disposition itself. In the event that it is moved – a road into the canyon from TA-18 can be used, or a conveyor apparatus might be installed to extract the debris. If TA-18 remains in place, debris removers will use the existing access road cut steeply into the canyon at the time of the construction to connect the site to Pajarito Road.

Also included in the proposal are other flood control devices built in the same program after the Cerro Grande Fire – a 760-foot long steel diversion wall that was supposed to provide immediate protection to TA-18 while the larger retention structure was being built upstream, and a low-head weir and detention basin located in Los Alamos Canyon, near the intersection of NM 4 and NM 502.

Among comments received, were those of Roy Weaver, superintendent of Bandelier National Monument at the time of the prescribed burn that led to the Cerro Grande Fire.

"I urge that DOE/LANL choose the alternative action which calls for the complete removal of the Pajarito Dam and the Low-head weir near White Rock," wrote Weaver. "Neither have proven necessary and just leaving all or parts of them just compounds the questionable hasty decisions made during the highly emotional period of the Cerro Grande Fire."

In the most extensive comments submitted, Bernard Foy, conservation chair of the Sangre de Cristo Audubon Society, expressed surprise that partial rather than full removal of the dam was the preferred option.

"All in all," he wrote, "we are extremely disappointed in this EA (Environmental Assessment). The document seems hurriedly prepared and filled with flaws. ... DOE should live up to its obligations and restore both Pajarito and Los Alamos Canyons to the extent practicable."

Also commenting on the proposal, the New Mexico Environment Department called the plan for partial removal of the retention structure to be "less preferable," because it would not allow Pajarito Canyon to return to pre-flood retention structure conditions.

The FONSI is accompanied by a formal Mitigation Action Plan that specifies future responsibilities of DOE and LANL, including an annual report, beginning in January 2004 and continuing until all mitigation actions are complete.