



New Mexico Health and Environment Department

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TO: Judith Espinosa, EID Secretary Designee

FROM: Bruce Swanton, Compliance Supervisor  
Hazardous and Radioactive Waste Bureau

THROUGH: Kathleen Sisneros, Chief  
Hazardous and Radioactive Waste Bureau

DATE: March 12, 1991

SUBJECT: Newspaper article concerning Public Service Company of  
New Mexico - Persons Generating Station

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Possibly as early as this afternoon the Albuquerque Tribune will carry a story by Tony Davis on the current facts and regulatory history of PNM's Persons Generating Station.

The history of this case is as follows:

1. PNM used a buried, upright open-ended concrete pipe for disposal of halogenated degreasing solvents between 1976 and 1983, when PNM discovered the problem and notified EID.
2. Solvents were identified in groundwater downgradient of the site: dichloroethane (DCA), trichloroethane (TCA) and perchloroethane (PCE). All were above the Water Quality Commission drinking water standards (aka Maximum Contaminant Limits - MCLs).
3. Pursuant to the RCRA regulations [40CFR §264.98(g)(5)] PNM petitioned EPA/EID for alternate concentration limits which would allow the continued existence of these solvents in the groundwater at levels in excess of the MCLs. Their position was that a) The source of the contamination had been greatly reduced by removal of the hydraulic head from the tank and the construction of a concrete cap over the tank site; b) the unsaturated zone between the tank bottom and the uppermost aquifer was of a low hydraulic conductivity; leading them to

conclude that c) the groundwater contamination would steadily decline over a period of years and the contaminant plume would be diluted so much as to not present a danger to the public health. EID/EPA accepted this conclusion.

4. The "post closure care permit" under which PNM must continue to monitor groundwater at the Persons site, and which includes inspection schedules, etc., allows contaminant limits for the three solvents to exceed the MCL's by approximately one-hundred times.
5. On February 7, 1990 PNM informed EID that groundwater concentrations of PCE and DCE in a monitoring well at PNM's downgradient property boundary had exceeded these post-closure care permit limits by 61% and 52%, respectively. One month later a retest indicated additional, more rapid increases in the concentration of all three contaminants.
6. Tests results for April and July, 1990 (ppm):

	April	July
DCA	78	56
PCE	80	53
TCA	27	15

7. The areal extent of the plume beyond PNM's site boundary is unknown. Soil gas studies were used to delineate the plume, but direct, monitoring well data offsite has never been collected.

Tony Davis has interviewed several ex-EID technical staff on this issue, most importantly Julie Wanslow. PNM Persons was Julie's case from January 1990 until she left the Bureau early this year. I generally share her opinions on the decisions made by EID which led to the existing post-closure care permit. When directly questioned by Tony regarding the wisdom of these decisions I made the following points:

1. At the time EID was evaluating the data supplied to it by PNM and its contractors, I do not believe that EID had technical staff of adequate expertise. At a minimum the plume should have been directly monitored to determine its extent and the rate at which it was moving.
2. It is extremely difficult to maintain staff of a high level of expertise at EID due to the higher salaries which the private sector can afford to pay. A partial solution to this problem has been the Bureau's increasingly frequent practice

of conferring with staff at EPA's Kerr Laboratory in Ada, Oklahoma. This gives the program access to technical specialists it cannot afford to maintain at EID.

3. EID will cause PNM to directly assess the rate and extent of the plume. It is likely but not certain that EID will require PNM to clean up the groundwater at the site.
4. In my opinion it is highly unlikely that an immediate threat to human health exists in this case. There are no known drinking supply wells downgradient and within a mile of the site. Internal discussion on this point is ongoing.
5. Hindsight is always 20/20. Nevertheless, the decisions made at the time appear to have been faulty.
6. All opinions stated by me were mine alone and should not be attributed to EID.