

Some explain Lobo loss in 2 words: the coach — Lynn Barber



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## Closed PNM power plant leaks pollution

By TONY DAVIS

Staff reporter

The state made a mistake four years ago by not requiring Public Service Company of New Mexico to curb or clean up ground-water pollution beneath an old South Albuquerque power plant, a state environmental official says.

In 1987, the state and PNM predicted the levels of toxic solvents in the water would stay the same or drop in the next few years. By April 1990, the levels of three toxic solvents in one monitoring well had shot up by seven to 26 times those of late 1987.

Since then, the well's chemical concentrations have dropped by half, but still

are three to 10 times higher than four years ago. Two solvents are at levels above state and federal drinking water standards.

Today, state officials say the contamination appears to be moving off the power plant's property to the east. State Environmental Improvement Division official Bruce Swanton says he will be very surprised if the state doesn't order PNM to clean the water, although "we're keeping an open mind."

"I do not believe the right call was made (in 1987)," says Swanton, who stressed he was speaking for himself and not the division.

Please see PNM/AS



Dorothy Milligan

The Public Service Company of New Mexico's Person Generating Station at Broadway and Rio Bravo boulevards Southeast, just west of I-25, has been closed since 1986.

PNM Genl Station

## Kurds gain ground in north Iraq

Wire reports

Kurdish rebels battling troops loyal to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein are claiming control of wide areas of northern Iraq.

Opposition forces in several other parts of the country also reported new military gains. In

### Gulf War spurs VFW membership

## A GRIPPING FINISH



**SCIENCE FAIR**

Northwestern New Mexico Regional Science Fair is held this weekend, with students from public and private schools in grades 6 through 12 competing for awards and other prizes. Viewing of the projects is from 7 to 9 p.m. and display from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. at M's Johnson Center, just off Popejoy Hall. For more information, call 277-4918.

held in Socorro next. From there, international competition is held at Disney World. "Which Light Bulbs Produce the Most Light?" Mullen, an eighth-grader at John Middle School. "It's what it is fun." Mullen, who was busy setting up a light-bulb comparison project for her mother, Denise, admitted she likes science and would like to be a psychologist. "If she wants to be a biologist, she'll have to know the scientific method," said Mullen. "That's why it's important for her to be doing this." Mullen said she has worked in city and state with major science labs, one has to wonder about some projects (11-year-old Mullen is working on the folding table and the up, say, a fission reactor). Mullen said many students and parents were quick to point out that

their project was legit, even as they cast suspicious eyes at the competition.

Sarah Roache, 11, said her project was all her own, from concept to victory at Hope Christian School's science fair.

Called "Hot Wings," it asks a question we all ask: "Why don't birds get electrocuted on power lines?"

Her exhibit features little fake birds and two power lines. The birds are rigged with light bulbs. And when a bird touches both power lines at once — well, for starters, his bulb lights up.

Roache is pretty proud of her work. "If I had put it off till the last minute, my dad would have killed me."

Back in the major leagues, Charlie Thomas has scouted the room to see what his son's cepheid project will be up against. The science fair's two top exhibits will go right to international competition without having to go to state, and both Thomases admit that's a goal.

If, for some reason, "Cepheid Variables: A Spectroscopic Study, Phase Three" doesn't prove to be a big winner, let us remember Thomas is only a sophomore and next year's project involves supernovas.

But his father, a diesel mechanic in Moriarty, seems confident about this year's chances.

"This is the genius in the family," he said with a smile. Blake Thomas instantly looked at the floor.

"I am not a genius," he said. "Don't call me that."

**PNM** From A1

He acknowledged that, "This is Monday morning quarterbacking and hindsight is always 20-20."

Last year, authorities also discovered that the well, which lies on the plant's east boundary, contained the toxic heavy-metal chromium at levels just above the drinking water standards.

Utility officials say they'll fight any order from the state to clean up the water. They assert the contamination is dissipating, and will continue to decline because solvents tend to vaporize as they age and will seep up as vapors from the ground water through the soil.

Tests of probes stuck 6 feet into the ground also show that the areas containing vaporous gases of the solvents have shrunk since 1985, PNM environmental official Ron Johnson said. The chromium pollution could be coming from the stainless steel well itself, Johnson said.

But if there is a cleanup, it's likely to cost more than it would have a few years ago, because the contamination appears to have spread, Swanton said.

It could take 25 years and cost up to \$3 million to pump the polluted water from the ground and treat it, the utility says. Since 1983, PNM has spent \$1 million on conducting water studies and hauling contaminated soil from the property.

The cost eventually could be passed to PNM's ratepayers.

PNM says it believes a cleanup should be considered a legitimate expense of decommissioning an old power plant, although the Public Service Commission would have to grant permission to charge the cost to ratepayers.

State officials say there's no way to tell if the area's overall water contamination is declining because nobody has tested the ground water beyond PNM's property line. The utility needs to drill more wells to make it clear how far the pollution has spread, said a former state official who worked on the case until recently.

"I think they (PNM) are relying too much on the soil and gas surveys," said Julie Wanslow, who now works for a private consultant in Carlsbad.

The nearest municipal wells lie 1.5 miles north of the power plant. The area's ground water flows east, so Swanton says the chance of those wells being polluted is low.

The case dates back to October 1983, when authorities learned that solvents had leaked into the ground from an old storage tank with an earthen bottom.

From 1984 to 1987, solvents in the ground water 20 feet below the surface were at levels above drinking water standards. But in fall 1987, state officials issued a permit that allowed the solvents to stay in the water.

At the time, the pollution levels were staying the same or slowly declining. PNM studies showed the soil above the ground water was of a type that

**FACT BOX**

This case involves Public Service Company of New Mexico's Person Generating Station, which lies at Broadway and Rio Bravo boulevards Southeast.

From 1951 to 1981, the plant powered much of the city with electricity. PNM cut back the plant's operations in 1981, closed it in 1986 and plans to demolish it.

did not allow contaminants to move through quickly, state officials said.

So the utility put two plastic liners, compacted soil and a concrete cap on top of the contaminated area, and hauled much of the site's contaminated soil to a landfill.

Swanton blamed the 1987 decision partly on a high turnover rate at the state's hazardous waste program that made it difficult to keep people with adequate technical knowledge of such cases.

But Kent Bostick, who worked on the case for the state in the middle 1980s, defended the division's decision.

"You may exceed the standards, but you have to look at the risk," said Bostick, now a private consultant for Jacobs Engineering Co. in Albuquerque. "There was no public water use (downstream) of the site. You've got to concentrate action on where there's risk to people."

