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Friday, March 5, 2004

EPA Attacks Lab Cleanup Plan

By Adam Rankin
Journal Staff Writer

Short and to the point, comments from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on hazardous and radioactive waste cleanup at Los Alamos are providing some comfort to laboratory watchdogs.

In comments delivered Thursday, EPA Region 6 reminds the Department of Energy that final cleanup decisions at Los Alamos National Laboratory are "dependent" on public participation and views held by the New Mexico Environment Department.

The EPA comments come in response to the Energy Department's "Risk-Based End State Vision Document" for cleanup at Los Alamos. Similar vision documents for other DOE sites have created a stir among other federal and state regulators, as well as citizen and environmental groups.

"We're not totally upset over it, but we also understand it is just a planning document," said EPA's Richard Mayer, the official who wrote the comments.

Over the past year, the Energy Department has pushed "Risk-Based End State" visions for each of its sites nationwide. The goal is cutting costs and time by cleaning up contaminated sites to

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only the level required by anticipated future land use. In many cases, that is an industrial standard that accommodates some level of pollution.

State regulatory agencies and citizens groups across the country have pushed back against the cheaper, faster DOE vision.

The New Mexico Environment Department, regional environmental groups and a citizens advisory board have likewise expressed varying degrees of outrage over the DOE draft vision document for Los Alamos. They cite the hasty way it has been put together with little public input.

Regional environmental groups and the top state environmental regulator say the plan will leave too much waste untouched.

"In these documents, DOE assumes that leaving waste in place is the best environmental option," Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry said when the 80-page draft document was first released in January.

Part of the DOE vision for Los Alamos includes transferring environmental management programs to the National Nuclear Security Administration.

The EPA's Mayer said he is concerned NNSA lacks much experience handling environmental cleanup and the public involvement that goes along with it.

Mayer's specific comments also address DOE assumptions that "capping and monitoring" is the end state for the "majority" of sites where mixed hazardous and radioactive wastes that according to DOE lie buried in lined and unlined pits and shafts.

"For some of these areas, we don't have all the investigation results to know exactly what will occur at those sites," Mayer said. "It would be premature to say



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that this (capping and monitoring) would be the final remediation."

According to the EPA comments, if contamination is spreading, the waste source may have to be removed.

Representatives of local environmental groups, while still reviewing the EPA comments, said they are pleased to see EPA challenge DOE assumptions that some waste can be left in place.



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