

Nuclear Watch New Mexico Tri-Valley CAREs

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ACTIVISTS VICTORIOUS IN DEMAND FOR COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF BIOWARFARE AGENT LAB AT LOS ALAMOS DEMAND SAME FOR LIVERMORE BIOLAB

Santa Fe, NM and Livermore, CA - The Department of Energy has just announced that it will be preparing a full environmental impact statement for an already constructed advanced biowarfare agent facility at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). This biolab is designated as a Biosafety Level-3 facility meant to handle and process pathogens such as anthrax, plague and Q fever, just short of the highest "4" level reserved for diseases like Ebola. In 2002 DOE completed a lesser environmental assessment that led to a "Finding of No Significant Impact," giving a green light to operations at the LANL's biolab without rigorous scrutiny of environmental impacts. Shortly thereafter, DOE also completed a low-level environmental assessment for a BSL-3 facility at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California.

Because of the link between the two proposed facilities, two allied citizens groups, Santa Fe-based Nuclear Watch New Mexico and Livermore-based Tri-Valley Communities Against a Radioactive Environment, filed suit in the federal 9th circuit in August 2003. The co-plaintiffs' primary argument was that because of the checkered history of safety, security and environmental issues at both troubled national laboratories, and because of the highly dangerous nature of the biowarfare agents involved, a more comprehensive environmental impact statement was required before operations could begin at either biolab. In January 2004, DOE withdrew its approval for the LANL biolab, and through its announcement of intent to prepare an EIS, has adopted our position.

"I am pleased that DOE has come to our side and accepted the wisdom of what has been our core argument all along," commented Jay Coghlan, Executive Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico. "The Los Alamos biolab cries out for a more stringent level of public review before operations begin, and

now New Mexicans get that opportunity. But on a cautionary note, we need to be careful that DOE doesn't use this opportunity to expand planned operations, such as conducting aerosolized experiments, which previously it said it would not do."

Aerosolized experiments on rodents with pathogens like anthrax are explicitly planned for the Livermore biolab. Such experiments inherently have higher occupational and public risks. They are also closer in form to crude but effective bioweapons such as those used in the October 2001 anthrax attacks, following which a government scientist was the main "person of interest." In addition, the Livermore biolab has far greater risks due to the density of its surrounding population and active earthquake faults.

Loulena Miles, Tri-Valley CAREs Staff Attorney, observed, "We're happy that the Department of Energy has decided to thoroughly study the risks and impacts from the Los Alamos biolabs, but we're appalled and mystified as to why the Department of Energy would choose to only conduct a faulty, low-level environmental review for Livermore's prefabricated biolab. Livermore's biolab will genetically modify and aerosolize biowarfare agents in a seismically active area with seven million people. Many health, safety and security concerns were not seriously addressed in the Livermore biolab's environmental assessment."

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