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Watchdog Urges Increasing DOE Accountability in Wake of Fines

Santa Fe, NM – Today the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) declared multiple violations at both the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) and Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). NMED plans to fine WIPP \$17.7 million and LANL \$36.6 million due to major procedural problems related to the handling of radioactive transuranic (TRU) wastes that contributed to two significant incidents at WIPP earlier this year.

In addition to “failure to adequately characterize waste” and other violations, LANL was cited for the processing of nitrate-bearing wastes and adding neutralizing agents to that waste stream. LANL treated this procedure as if it was outside the state hazardous waste permit, but NMED determined that these operations were not exempt. LANL treated 100s of waste drums without a permit, and one of these was apparently the cause of the February 14, 2014 radioactive release at WIPP that contaminated 21 workers.

WIPP was cited for, among other violations, not notifying NMED in a timely fashion of the February 14 radioactive release.

The \$36.6 million fine at LANL is based on up to \$10,000 per day per non-compliance, but still represents only .02% of the Lab’s \$2.1 billion annual budget. The contractor that runs the Lab, Los Alamos National Security, LLC, is eligible to earn \$57 million in bonus award fees for the fiscal year that ended last September 30th.

NMED stipulated that the penalties couldn’t be paid for out of designated funding for environmental cleanup or operational needs at LANL and WIPP.

Scott Kovac, Research Director at Nuclear Watch New Mexico, stated, “We applaud these efforts to hold the Department of Energy accountable in New Mexico and we urge NMED to not negotiate these relatively modest fines down, as is typically the case. These fines should be paid out of the contractor’s profits. The Lab had this waste for over 20 years and still could not get it right. We hope these NMED fines are a wake up call for safe, comprehensive cleanup of all the wastes left from the Cold War at the Los Alamos Lab.”

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NMED information is available at <http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us>.