

# Los Alamos Plans New Radwaste Dump

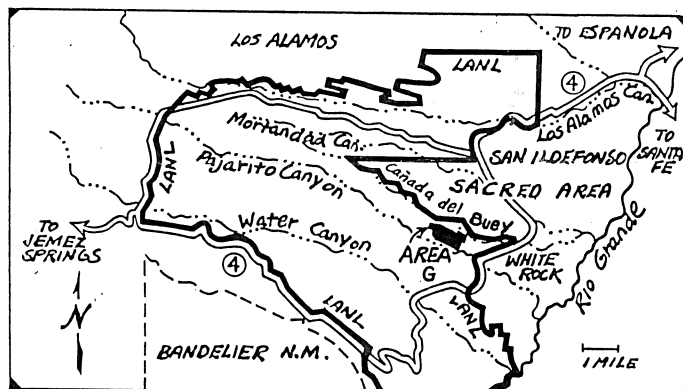
Expansion of "Area G" Threatens to Further Desecrate Pajarito Plateau

## ► Background ◀

Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) has produced approximately 12 million cubic feet of radioactive and chemical solid wastes since work began there in 1943. All the radioactive waste, and nearly all the chemical waste, have been buried on the mesas of the Pajarito Plateau. Radioactive liquid wastes were discharged to the canyons, initially with little treatment. In 1957, with its other designated solid waste sites filling up, the Laboratory set aside a new disposal area for solid radioactive waste, called Area G, on Mesita del Buey just west of White Rock. This site has been in continuous use since then, and has received about 7 million cubic feet of radwaste. The waste is buried in dozens of giant shallow pits scraped into the mesa with bulldozers, typically 600 feet long and 30 feet deep, and in roughly two hundred shafts drilled into the soft tuff. Area G began as a five-acre site; by 1976 it had grown to 37 acres. Now it is 63 acres in size, and LANL seeks to more than double this area by adding another 72 acres for future pits and shafts. The ancient pueblo ruins that once dotted the mesa have been destroyed as the site has grown. Area G is also used for the indefinite storage of thousands of drums and boxes of plutonium wastes ("transuranic," or TRU, wastes), hypothetically slated to go to WIPP.

## ► Key Issues In Brief ◀

► The proposed new dump contains several ancient Anasazi ruins. It lies on Mesita del Buey just one mile west of Tshirege, the largest Anasazi Pueblo on the Pajarito Plateau. The waste disposal pits are adjacent to a congressionally-protected Sacred Area of San Ildefonso Pueblo.



► The site is part of a large tract loaned for temporary military use by San Ildefonso in 1942, for the purpose of helping bring an end to the war. Portions of that land are now contaminated. With continued dumping of radioactive waste, more land is becoming contaminated every year.

► Despite written protests from all eight northern Pueblos and 28 environmental groups, DOE has refused to write an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the new dump. DOE persists in its refusal despite published admissions of LANL noncompliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) by LANL and DOE auditors.

► The proposed dump is adjacent to a permanent spring and wetland, and is upstream from the suburb of White Rock. Surface water in Pajarito Canyon has been used as a potable water supply from Anasazi times until the establishment of the Lab.

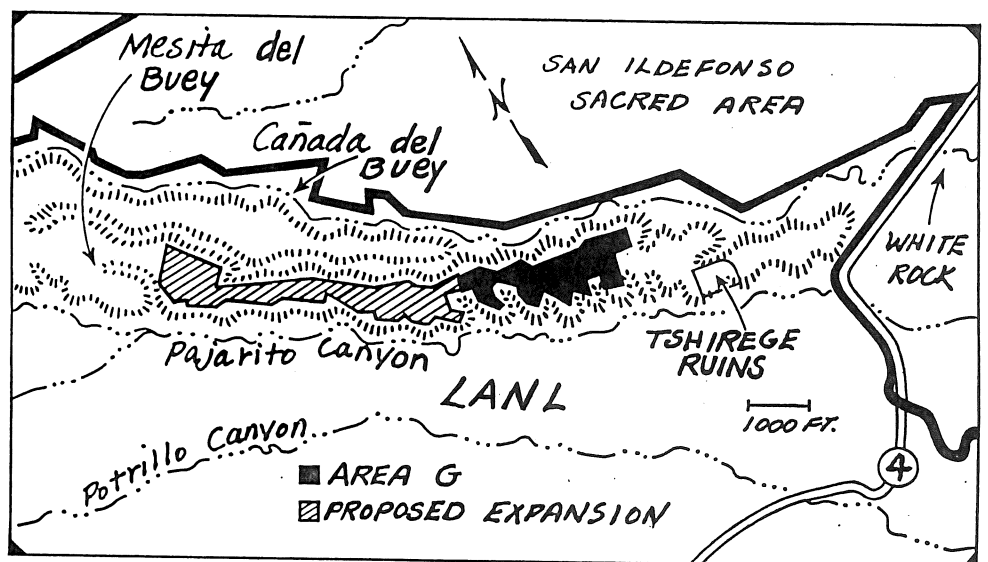
► The environmental analyses that have been done for the project are being kept from the public and the Pueblos by the DOE. No public hearings have been held and none are planned.

► LANL archaeologists have already begun to destroy the ancient ruins to make way for new radioactive waste pits. This work was recently halted by Pueblo intervention.

► LANL admits it has no aggressive waste minimization program. LANL is not using a compactor to decrease the volume of waste it must bury. More than half the waste currently being buried is actually non-radioactive "suspect" trash, which rapidly uses up existing pit capacity.

► The 7 million cubic feet of "low-level" radioactive waste buried in Area G dump contain about 2 million curies of radionuclides. The volume of this waste is equal to that of about 1 million 55-gallon drums. This "low-level" waste includes spent reactor fuel and other highly-radioactive materials. Low-level and "suspect" radwaste is currently being generated at a rate of about 83,000 cubic feet per year.

► In addition to "low-level" waste, about 381,000 cubic feet of transuranic (TRU) waste, containing 258,000 curies of long-lived radionuclides such as plutonium, are now stored at Area G. This is enough to fill 52,000 drums, and comprises about 14% of all TRU waste in the United States. About 2,300 cubic feet of additional TRU wastes are generated each year. Before 1971 all plutonium-containing wastes generated at LANL were irretrievably buried on the Pajarito Plateau. In



1984, the definition of TRU waste was changed so that less-concentrated plutonium wastes were redefined as "low-level," enabling them to be buried permanently at Area G.

▶ Even without improved procedures, the current dump will not be completely full until late 1995. This provides adequate time for an EIS with attendant public and Pueblo input. Yet construction of the new dump could begin by early 1994.

▶ Most LANL radioactive waste, and virtually all plutonium waste, comes from its nuclear weapons programs--programs which are largely needless, wasteful, and destructive.

▶ Area G now has an underground vapor plume of organic solvents and of radioactive tritium. Corroded and leaking drums of plutonium waste there triggered the largest proposed environmental fine in the history of New Mexico (\$1.6 million, now being whittled down by LANL lawyers).

▶ Airborne tritium and plutonium at the dump are many times background levels. Plutonium has been found in site soils, vegetation, and in sediments washed from the site--in some cases over 100 times background levels.

▶ Radioactive tritium was recently found in the deep aquifer beneath Los Alamos--after decades of LANL assurances that this could never occur. Shallow, as well as intermediate ("perched") aquifers are found beneath Pajarito Canyon, immediately south of the dump; groundwater is percolating downward from this and other canyons to the deeper aquifers below. Even on the mesa tops, where the proposed dump will be, evidence of flowing water can be found along fractures

deep within the tuff. A small fault passes through the dump.

▶ Despite a decade of protest from the State, LANL has no definite plans to cap Area G to keep out water and to keep the dump's radioactive contents protected through the centuries from roots, burrowing animals, and erosion by wind and water. The pits are now, as in 1957, simply covered with at least three feet of sandy crushed tuff.

▶ The new dump would not be subject to formal inspection and regulation by the State of New Mexico, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the EPA, the Pueblos, or any other outside agency.

▶ The Area G expansion is but one of two proposed huge new LANL radioactive waste dumps. The second dump, called the Mixed Waste Disposal Facility (MWDF), is to be even larger than the Area G expansion--in fact, it would be more than twice the size of WIPP. The MWDF, LANL's proposed radioactive waste incinerator, its prospective radioactive liquid waste treatment plant (current price tag: \$175 million and climbing), its proposed WIPP waste processing plant, together with several other related projects, could make LANL's on-site waste-handling and disposal capacity second to none. These projects provide strong incentives to locate plutonium processing and weapons-manufacturing activities in Los Alamos. Despite a combined price tag of roughly \$300 million in construction costs alone, none of them, nor all of the projects taken together, is receiving an EIS.

**There are several alternatives to this large new nuclear dump. First, LANL programs should be examined to see which ones are producing the most waste. The need for these activities, especially given the end of the Cold War, should be seriously examined. Second, aggressive waste minimization programs should be implemented, making sure managers and their programs have strong incentives to decrease radwaste generation. Third, "suspect" waste can be reduced by physically checking objects for contamination. Fourth, the emplacement of waste in an above-grade mound at the existing Area G should be examined. As a last resort, waste could be sent offsite, as LANL's sister lab in Livermore does. The purpose of an EIS is to carefully examine alternatives like these in a context of public and Pueblo participation.**

## **What You Can Do**

▶ Write Secretary of Energy Hazel O'Leary and demand a full EIS for this and other major LANL projects. Her address is: *The Honorable Hazel O'Leary, Secretary/ U.S. Department of Energy/ 1000 Independence Ave. SW/ Washington, DC 20585.*

▶ Write Congressman Bill Richardson and request that he intervene to slow this project enough to write an EIS and publicly discuss the alternatives. His address is: *The Honorable Bill Richardson/ 411 Paseo de Peralta/ Santa Fe, NM 87501.*

▶ If you belong to an environmental group, a church, or other organization, send an organizational letter opposing this project. Then join with San Ildefonso, the Eight Northern Pueblos, and the numerous environmental and peace groups who have come together to fight this project (see list below).

▶ Call and offer your help. All kinds of support are needed--help with leafletting, telephone outreach, office work, research, organization of events, performance and other arts, and, of course, financial help. Work is being coordinated by:

**Jay Coghlan at Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety in Santa Fe: 986-1973;**

**Greg Mello or Mary Riseley at the Los Alamos Study Group in Santa Fe: 988-4864;**

**Karin Salzman at People for Peace in Santa Fe: 988-1097; and**

**Janna Rolland at Physicians for Social Responsibility in Albuquerque: 262-1862;**

**Help stop the needless dumping of radioactive waste on the Pajarito Plateau! Keep New Mexico safe, beautiful, and sacred for our grandchildren! Let LANL and our congressional representatives know that we don't want to host a growing nuclear weapons and radioactive waste complex! Enough is enough!**