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For immediate release

New Mexico Water Commission Strengthens Limits for Public Disclosure of Radioactively Contaminated Rio Grande Water

Targets Water "At Greatest Risk" from Los Alamos Lab Plutonium, Tritium Pollution

Institute Calls on U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to Follow Suit

Takoma Park, Maryland, October 28, 2010: The State of New Mexico Water Quality Control Commission has tightened monitoring requirements for plutonium, tritium, and other radioactive contamination in a segment of the Rio Grande deemed "at greatest risk from potential LANL [Los Alamos National Laboratory] discharges."

The order, adopted earlier this month, reflects the commission's concern that "discharges from Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) could threaten public water supplies on the Rio Grande."

The new criteria require public notification if water samples taken from the Rio Grande near LANL have a plutonium concentration exceeding 1.5 picocuries per liter. Federal law requires corrective action at 15 picocuries per liter. The Commission's criterion for tritium is 4,000 picocuries per liter, five times stricter than the federal limit of 20,000 picocuries per liter.

Dr. Arjun Makhijani, president of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (IEER), noted the significance of the state's move. "New Mexico's Environment Department, its Water Quality Commission, and Governor Richardson's whole administration, should be congratulated for recognizing that the risks from contaminated drinking water should be lowered significantly, especially when there are known sources of man-made contaminants, like the plutonium from Los Alamos National Laboratory, which discharged radioactive materials into canyons feeding the Rio Grande River during and after the World War II years."

Dr. Makhijani praised the Commission's use of the most up-to-date dose conversion factors – values that allow calculation of lifetime cancer risk from radiation exposure – published by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). This is in contrast to an older EPA policy that is

based on doses to adult “Caucasian” males, ignoring the higher vulnerability of children and females.

“The state of New Mexico has blazed a trail that we hope the federal government will follow,” Dr. Makhijani continued. “By establishing monitoring requirements for plutonium that are ten times stronger than the federal government’s and for tritium that are five times more stringent, New Mexico is increasing health protections for the many people – especially women and children – now using this water, and for the future generations who will use it.”

IEER and the New Mexico-based group Amigos Bravos had asked the Commission to adopt a plutonium limit 100 times, and a tritium level 50 times, stronger than the federal limit. “New Mexico’s new criteria are based on one in 100,000 people dying from cancer from a lifetime of exposure,” said Rachel Conn of Amigos Bravos. “We asked for a more protective one in a million standard, which is common elsewhere, including at the federal level. Although the state’s new criteria are not precisely where they need to be, it is a big step for better public health protection from radioactive pollution in our water. We are 90 percent of the way there.”

Plutonium and tritium are known to cause cancer, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, with the increase in risk being proportional to the radiation dose. If a pregnant woman is exposed to tritium, a radioactive form of hydrogen that can cross the placenta as water, in the weeks after fertilization, it may cause birth defects or an early failed pregnancy.

The new radionuclide criteria are not legal limits on LANL. Rather, they are to be used “for monitoring and public disclosure purposes only,” according to the Commission order. Under the federal Atomic Energy Act, the state of New Mexico is not allowed to regulate certain radioactive discharges from LANL.

The Water Quality Control Commission sets water quality standards for the state in accordance with the federal Clean Water Act. New Mexico law requires review of the water quality standards every three years. The new order will become effective 30 days after the Commission files it with the state, which is expected to occur within 2 weeks.

IEER is a nonprofit, nonpartisan technical institute based in Takoma Park, Maryland. IEER and its New Mexico-based partners, including Amigos Bravos and Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, have been working together for several years to get the state to strengthen public health protections for plutonium and other radionuclides in drinking water.