



Buckman Direct Diversion Project

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Buckman Direct Diversion Will Make LANL Accountable for Water Safety

By Virginia Vigil, Vice Chair  
Buckman Direct Diversion Board  
Santa Fe County Commissioner

In response to Shannyn Sollitt's opinion piece which ran in the September 14, 2008 edition of the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, "Make LANL accountable for our water's safety," we appreciate Ms. Sollitt's acknowledgement that the BDD Board and staff "are doing their level best to protect the citizens from the contamination from the laboratory." However, we need to emphasize that Ms. Sollitt is incorrect in assuming that the new City/County water treatment plant may not be effective. It will be.

We are certain the new plant will consistently meet all current safe drinking water standards as well as the stringent standards that have been adopted by California and Colorado, and that some Santa Fe community members are advocating), and the proposed more stringent standards for LANL-origin contaminants currently under discussion. It is important to remember that the treatment plant is designed to stop diverting water when there are large amounts of runoff from Los Alamos Canyon that can reach the Rio Grande. Additionally, the City/County Treatment Plant has been designed with the best available technology for removal of any contaminants that might be in the water that is diverted for treatment.

There are no rising levels of plutonium, cesium and other radioactive contaminants detected in the Buckman Well Field, which is separate from the BDD river diversion project. Ms. Sollitt is incorrect in her claim that elevated levels of these contaminants have been detected in these wells. Only ONE reading several years ago detected a slightly elevated level of plutonium, and the accuracy of that reading has been brought into question by an independent scientific journal. The Buckman wells are tested every three months using very sensitive analytical techniques. No readings since then have shown ANY

detectable increases in these contaminants in the Buckman Well Field. The body of water quality data suggests that the overall pattern is non-detect for LANL contaminants in the Buckman wells.

We all agree that the Rio Grande is an important water source for the future of the Santa Fe region, and that LANL must stop migration of contaminants in storm water runoff to the Rio Grande. We will be working closely and continually with the NMED and LANL to make sure that the plan to do this is implemented, and we will also work with them to ensure the remaining four action steps that we requested in November 2007 are not just studied – but also implemented. The BDD Board will continue to provide public transparency on steps taken to address these action steps. LANL has pledged their commitment, and we will work with them to make sure they follow through on that pledge.

The BDD Board agrees with Ms. Sollitt’s contention that “the time has come for the national laboratory to get out of study mode . . .and mak[e] sure none of the contaminated runoff ever reaches the Rio Grande.”

In November 2007 the BDD Board formally requested that LANL stop radioactive and toxic contaminants from flowing into the Rio Grande in a letter that outlined in six detailed action items. The BDD Board also committed to total public transparency, including the development of plans to address these requests.

While the BDD staff and consultants appreciate the cooperation to date by LANL staff, progress has been slower than we hoped.

The formal response from LANL to the November 2007 BDD letter was received in May, 2008.. Two of the six action items requested have been addressed under the direction of the BDD staff and the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED).

The BDD took the lead in May of this year to measure the radionuclides in buried sediments in the abandoned river channel near where the BDD facilities are to be built and help the BDD determine if minor realignment of project facilities could avoid these areas.

The BDD arranged and paid for drilling services. The NMED provided expert professional services of its staff and paid for the laboratory analysis.

BDD staff took the lead because the sampling plan originally provided by LANL would not have yielded the detail results we needed. The NMED issued their report, *Los Alamos National Laboratory Legacy Contaminant Study at the Buckman Direct Diversion* in August 2008. The report verifies that construction of the BDD will not disturb the LANL-origin radionuclide contamination that was deposited in the now-abandoned river channel by the 1950s and 1960s floods.

The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) earlier this year directed LANL to prepare a plan to mitigate contaminated sediment transport in Los Alamos and Pueblo Canyons. NMED has approved the LANL plan to build the necessary infrastructure in these canyons to reduce the flow rates to levels that will result in decreases of surface water contaminate concentration. The plan also calls for an extensive monitoring plan to ensure that the objectives of reduced sediment transport and contaminant concentrations are achieved. We appreciate the efforts of the NMED and LANL with regard to these mandatory measures, which will help realize the BDD's goal of stopping migration of these contaminants.

The BDD Board fully supports the New Mexico surface water quality regulations designed to maintain the radioactivity of the surface waters of the state "at the lowest practical level." The BDD Board also believes that full implementation of the NMED-approved plan requiring LANL to control storm water and its erosion of contaminated sediments should be accomplished as soon as possible. The time for action is now and the BDD Board and staff will continue to press LANL to deal with and pay for the problems created by LANL.

For more information, we encourage readers to review the BDD Project website at [www.bddproject.org](http://www.bddproject.org) and click on the Water Quality button.