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Clean water advocates target Los Alamos pollution

Los Alamos, NM – Urban storm water pollution from PCBs, copper, zinc, nickel, and gross alpha radiation in Los Alamos County is threatening public health – some pollutants are more than ten thousand times over public safety limits. This pollution should have triggered federal action to reduce or eliminate these discharges in the form of a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit, but the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has failed to act. Amigos Bravos and the Western Environmental Law Center [petitioned](#) the agency to address this threat, but it did not respond. Today, the groups sent a [letter](#) notifying the EPA of the organizations’ intent to sue in order to ensure the safety of water supplies in and around Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL).

As required by the Clean Water Act, New Mexico has set standards to ensure New Mexico’s rivers, streams and lakes are clean enough to allow the public to use these waters for drinking, swimming, boating, and other activities, and to support healthy populations of fish and wildlife. To ensure these standards are met, the Clean Water Act requires the EPA to regulate stormwater runoff when that runoff is making the water unsafe.

The New Mexico Environment Department’s (NMED) data show dramatic exceedances of the state’s PCB human health water quality limits. PCB levels in Los Alamos Canyon are more than 11,000 times greater than the New Mexico Human Health water quality criteria and 51 times greater than the New Mexico Wildlife Habitat water quality criteria. Sandia Canyon shows PCB contamination more than 14,000 times greater than the New Mexico Human Health water quality criteria and 66 times greater than the New Mexico Wildlife Habitat water quality criteria. PCBs levels in Pueblo Canyon are more than 3,500 times greater than the New Mexico Human Health water quality criteria and 16 times greater than the New Mexico Wildlife Habitat water quality criteria. These three drainages are all heavily influenced by urban stormwater runoff.

The state’s 303d/305b report documents many more exceedances of standards – for a variety of pollutants and locations. Mortandad Canyon is high in PCBs, mercury, silver, cyanide, copper, and gross alpha radiation pollution. Pajarito Canyon is impaired for gross alpha radiation, aluminum, PCBs, and copper. LANL’s own documents confirm these findings and identify urban runoff as the culprit for many of these pollutants.

As a result, in 2015 EPA published a preliminary designation finding that the petition should be granted, but has failed to take any action.

“Under the Clean Water Act, the rubber hits the road when the standards and goals for waterways are turned into permit requirements,” said Andrew Hawley, attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center. “EPA must act now to protect the people and environment in Los Alamos County. We hope the EPA decides to do the right thing without having to go to court, but we’re more than ready if it comes to that.”

“This toxic pollution flows down from Los Alamos into the Rio Grande above the drinking water diversions for both Santa Fe and Albuquerque,” said Rachel Conn, projects director with Amigos Bravos. “It is long past due for EPA to take action to protect New Mexicans’ public health and environment by requiring that these toxic discharges be controlled and monitored.”

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