Lab obtains approval to begin design on new radioactive waste staging facility

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Buildings would replace existing facilities at Technical Area 54

LOS ALAMOS, New Mexico, September 1, 2010—Los Alamos National Laboratory today announced it has obtained Department of Energy approval to begin preliminary design of a new transuranic (TRU) waste staging facility. The facility would replace a number of buildings and fabric domes at LANL's Technical Area 54, which must be closed and remediated by 2015 under the Consent Order agreement with the state of New Mexico.

"Technical Area 54 will close, but the Lab's mission continues," said Craig Leasure, deputy principal associate director of LANL's Weapons Program. "This facility will be safer for workers and the public, it consolidates our operations, and it will be more cost efficient."

The facility will be a staging area for newly generated waste destined for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) near Carlsbad, New Mexico. TRU waste, which by law must go to WIPP, contains items such as gloves, clothing, and lab equipment contaminated with elements heavier than uranium and above certain quantities.

The 4-acre complex will include multiple staging buildings plus an operations center and a concrete pad for mobile waste characterization equipment. It is planned for a site at the Lab's Technical Area 63, in an area closed to the general public.

Workers would perform much the same verifications of TRU waste that now take place at Technical Area 54, including high-energy neutron counting, which detects the amount of radioactivity within a given container.

TRU waste would be packaged where it is generated (at various Lab sites), then characterized and certified for shipping at the new facility, and finally loaded for shipping at the Lab's current TRU shipping facility.

The facility will require a modification to the Lab's hazardous waste permit, which will likely be submitted next summer.

"We'll work closely with the New Mexico Environment Department to ensure we're meeting their expectations," Leasure said.

The project cost based on the conceptual design is estimated at $85 million, with a projected range between $71 million and $124 million. After preliminary and final designs are approved, the construction will occur in two phases: site infrastructure and facility construction. Completion is targeted for the end of 2015.

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