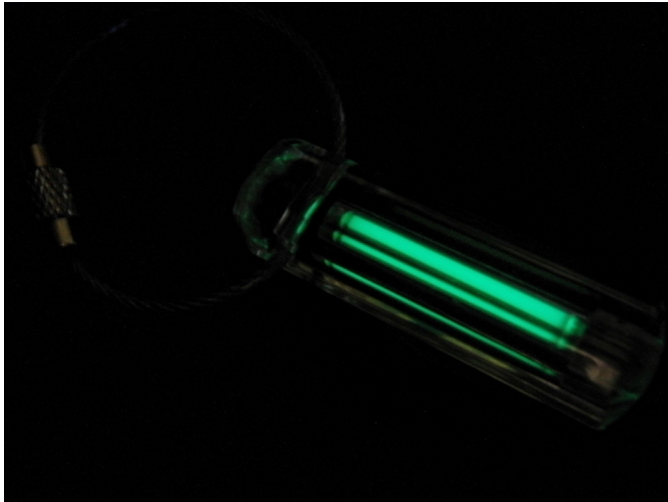


## Release of radioactive isotope could start this month

Written by Staff Reports

Friday, 18 September 2020 03:23

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### Whistleblower's grievance reveals LANL tritium release over legal limit

SANTA FE —The New Mexico Environmental Law Center and Nuclear Watch New Mexico notified the Environmental Protection Agency Aug. 28 that its rubber stamping of plans by the Department of Energy and the Los Alamos National Laboratory to vent up to 114,000 curies of radioactive gaseous tritium is unacceptable.

The two organizations stated:

“We believe that EPA and DOE, as federal agencies mandated to serve and protect the public, need to entirely reconsider their decision to allow this tritium venting project to move forward. The venting project has been poorly thought out; it would put an inestimable number of individuals needlessly at risk; it would disproportionately affect communities of color; it would exacerbate the distrust that many people in the surrounding communities have for the Laboratory; and it would most likely violate the law. The agencies need to compel [LANL contractor] Triad to develop an alternative means to dispose of the radioactive tritium without expelling it into the ambient air.”

In March 2020 Nuclear Watch New Mexico publicized the Lab's plans to intentionally release up

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to 114,000 curies of tritium, a radioactive isotope of hydrogen gas, beginning in April 2020. Public reaction was swift and outspoken, prompting the Lab to postpone the releases. However, a recent Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board report indicates that LANL is getting ready to restart these releases, perhaps as soon as this month.

DOE's radioactive air emissions are regulated by the EPA under the federal Clean Air Act. That agency had rubber stamped LANL's plans for these massive tritium releases a mere three days after receiving them. This is despite the fact that in the late 1980's, LANL had violated the Clean Air Act's legal standard of limiting the public's annual radioactive air dose to 10 millirem, which EPA had done nothing to enforce.

LANL's past Clean Air Act violations were discovered and disclosed by a citizens' group based on a whistleblower's labor grievance, and not by EPA. The Lab had been using an unapproved dose reduction factor to stay under the Clean Air Act's legal limit, which once disallowed put the Lab in violation. Similarly, with these currently planned tritium releases, the Lab is again using an unapproved dose reduction factor which EPA has not questioned. If this unapproved dose reduction factor is disallowed LANL's potential air emissions dose would be double the Clean Air Act's standard of 10 millirem per year, hence blatantly illegal.

Tritium is used to boost the nuclear detonation of plutonium "pit" bomb cores. As part of the new nuclear arms race LANL is rushing to expand plutonium pit production, which is slated for a half billion dollar increase in the next federal fiscal year alone. As an emitter of low energy beta radiation, tritium is not dangerous externally. However, because tritium is an isotope of hydrogen it easily bonds with oxygen to form radioactive (or "tritiated") water that living organisms (including fetuses) can uptake.

Thus, it can be a dangerous radiation hazard when inhaled as gaseous tritium or ingested in food or water or absorbed through the skin as tritiated water. Most atmospherically released tritium gas rapidly converts into tritiated water vapor and thus can readily enter the biosphere.

"Now more than ever we must demand long overdue environmental justice for all communities impacted by environmental pollution and toxins, especially frontline communities that continue to bear the brunt of environmental racism," Virginia Necochea, executive director of the New Mexico Environmental Law Center commented. "The Law Center is committed to working alongside communities in ensuring their fundamental right to clean air and a health environment."

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“These planned massive radioactive air releases document that the Lab prioritizes expanded nuclear weapons production and more contamination and radioactive wastes above public safety and welfare,” Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch New Mexico added. “Citizens may need to act again. The planned tritium releases, and the Lab’s past history, show that Lab officials do not take their Clean Air Act obligations seriously, and that EPA has been all too lax and accommodating in its oversight and enforcement responsibilities.”

LANL’s notice to EPA on its planned tritium release is available at <https://permalink.lanl.gov/object/tr?what=info:lanl-repo/lareport/LA-UR-20-22239>