Recovery Act milestone: Excavation begins at Manhattan Project landfill

July 1, 2010

Extra safety precautions for six-acre site

LOS ALAMOS, New Mexico, July 1, 2010—Los Alamos National Laboratory today began excavating a World War II-era landfill that could contain an entire truck used at the Trinity atomic bomb test—the world's first test of an atomic weapon. Crews will scoop out 22,000 cubic yards of trash and dirt—enough to cover a football field to a depth of about 11 feet—and fill the excavated areas with clean soil that meets residential standards.

The project's funding of about $90 million is provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which is helping accelerate environmental cleanup across the Department of Energy's weapons complex.

“This project marks major environmental cleanup progress for the Lab,” said Everett Trollinger, Recovery Act project manager for NNSA’s Los Alamos Site Office. “We look forward to the day we are able to transfer this land for other uses.”

The landfill is known as Material Disposal Area B. The six-acre site contains a series of trenches used from 1944 to 1948 to dispose of hazardous and non-hazardous trash from Manhattan Project labs and buildings.

Despite the original purpose of the landfill, cleanup crews do not expect to find much radioactive material. Plutonium was extremely rare, and any created during World War II was zealously recovered for reuse. Soil cores taken last year estimate that between three and seven ounces of plutonium are scattered across the site. That’s about the weight of small mobile phone.

However, according to persistent Lab legend, an entire truck from the Trinity site was driven back to Los Alamos and buried in MDA B.

“We might uncover something that could go to the Bradbury Science Museum in Los Alamos,” LANL program manager Andy Baumer said.

The landfill is located within the Lab’s historic Technical Area 21 and right across the street from several Los Alamos businesses, prompting extra safety precautions at the site. To prevent dust migration and to isolate the waste during digging, all excavation will take place inside 13 sturdy metal buildings equipped with air filtration, remote cameras, chemical sensors, and fire suppression systems.

“We’re being extra cautious with our workers and with our neighbors,” said Baumer.

The work at MDA B must be complete by December, 2010, per the Consent Order agreement on LANL cleanup with the state of New Mexico.

Los Alamos National Laboratory **www.lanl.gov** **(505) 667-7000** **Los Alamos, NM**

Operated by Los Alamos National Security, LLC for the Department of Energy's NNSA