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Los Alamos led project continues to recover radioactive sources

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LOS ALAMOS, N.M., Dec. 20, 2001 -- A project of the Department of Energy's Los Alamos National Laboratory to remove excess and unwanted sealed radioactive sources from the public and private sector recently assisted the New Mexico Highway Transportation Department in safely removing a potential hazard. Members of the Off-Site Recovery Project recovered from the state agency's Santa Fe facilities an americium-beryllium well logging unit that had once been used for geo-technical investigations. The Off-Site Recovery Project Team works out of the Environmental Division at Los Alamos.

According to Darreyl Bursch of the Highway Department, the source, small enough to fit in the palm of your hand is a cylinder about 1 1/2 inches in diameter and about 5 inches long. It was left over after the primary tools of the logging unit were sold several years ago. Bursch called the New Mexico Environmental Department for advice on how to dispose of the source, and was then referred to the OSR Project team at Los Alamos.

"There are radioactive materials similar to this source in cities and towns across America that once served a useful purpose but are no longer needed," said Lee Leonard, group leader of the OSR Project. "Currently, no disposal facilities are available for these obsolete devices and the Lab is providing a national service in collecting and safely storing them."

Excess sealed radioactive power sources that provide energy for devices like older model heart pacemakers,

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industrial gauges and medical and scientific instrumentation have been accumulating for decades. Though the total amount of radioactive material in each source isn't large, the total number of sources needing attention keeps the Off-Site Source Recovery Project team busy.

The group travels all across the country to recover and manage the sealed sources to reduce potential health, safety and environmental risks to the public.

If sealed sources are excess and no longer wanted by a Nuclear Regulatory Commission or Agreement State licensee, then they become a Department of Energy responsibility under public law 99-240. The OSR Project is tasked with collecting and storing those sources for which recycling or reuse are not viable options until final disposal becomes available.

During 2001, the OSR Project recovered almost 3,000 sealed sources, which have been consolidated into about 130 storage containers at Technical Area 54 at the Laboratory. A few of these sources may prove to be eligible for disposal at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant as transuranic waste while the rest will stay in Los Alamos for now.

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Los Alamos National Laboratory is operated by the University of California for the U.S. Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration.

Additional news releases related to Environmental Science

Additional news releases from the Environmental Science and Waste Technology (E) Division

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