

Radioactive and Hazardous Materials Committee, Emergency Preparedness  
August 15, 2024  
Gallup, New Mexico

Cynthia Weehler, Co-Chair, 285 Alliance

In our increasingly dangerous world, we depend on government agencies to protect us from dangers we don't even know exist. Newly invented chemicals being used in new ways present new dangers:

- PFAS and lead in drinking water.
- Runaway thermal fires from battery storage stations that emit hydrogen fluoride and are built too close to residential areas.
- Accidental and intentional releases of radioactive and toxic chemicals that cause cancer while destroying property values.

These dangers aren't just future risks. They're causing emergencies now.

How do you know which agency is responsible, if it knows how to deal with a specific danger, if personnel are trained and available, if the public knows what to do before help arrives? It's remarkably hard to find this information. It's like looking for a black cat, in a dark room, that isn't even there.

Our community group has been investigating how prepared our government agencies are. Much of the information is anecdotal because I don't have permission to use the names of some I spoke with. This is what we've found.

**Federal:**

Local emergency responders, first on a scene, aren't told about new risks created by federal agencies like the Department of Energy (DOE). For instance, I make presentations to inform communities about new missions planned for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, WIPP. The information is published in the Federal Register. These new plans increase the kind and likelihood of risks to both the public and emergency responders. Emergency planners haven't even been told the risk has changed.

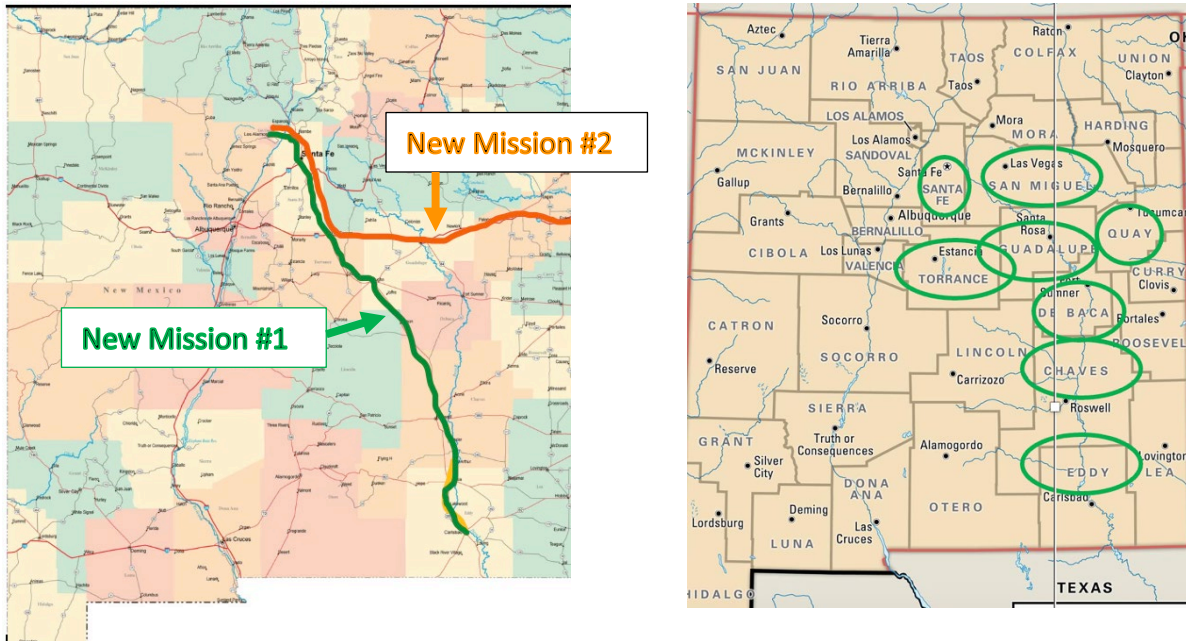
I know this because, at one presentation, an exceptionally perceptive and experienced leader in county emergency management told me he'd never been told about DOE's new missions, missions that put his responders among the first at a complex scene involving radioactive materials and toxic chemicals. This wasn't by accident. DOE didn't want people to know about this unpopular project, even to the extent that it kept emergency planners in the dark.

**State:**

The State Emergency Response Commission, SERC, has met sporadically for years, sometimes twice a year, once a year, or not at all. The next meeting is early September and I haven't been able to find where this public meeting is posted.

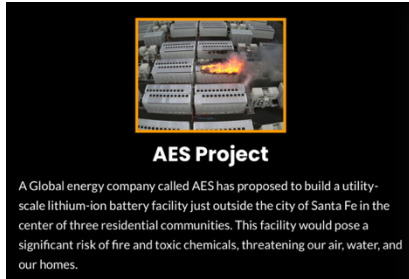
The SERC was told this past February that EPCRA compliance (federal Emergency Planning and Community Right-To-Know Act) is lacking in Santa Fe County. The Emergency Program Manager for the NM Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, Zachary Wachter, said in a June news article that in about a third of NM counties (including Santa Fe), the required committee and Hazmat response plans under EPCRA don't exist.

[https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local\\_news/with-state-approval-santa-fe-county-to-organize-emergency-planning-group/article\\_42b47214-299a-11ef-8d85-2ff7cbbd98a.html](https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local_news/with-state-approval-santa-fe-county-to-organize-emergency-planning-group/article_42b47214-299a-11ef-8d85-2ff7cbbd98a.html)



**County:** (Included because it works hand-in-hand with the state on emergency preparedness)

1. Through an IPRA request (Inspection of Public Records Act) we've learned that
  - Santa Fe County has no Hazmat team. This is the county with the most communities on the designated route for radioactive and hazardous chemical waste shipments. If available, the city's Hazmat team will be requested. If unavailable, Los Alamos or Albuquerque will be called.
  - A private company is asking Santa Fe County to allow it to build a battery electrical storage system (BESS) facility concerningly close to large residential communities. This type of battery storage system is subject to thermal, runaway fires that release toxic gases and can't be extinguished. When preparing its application to the county, the company asked the county if it had a current pre-incident plan for this kind of system (BESS). The county said no but suggested the company might help the county prepare one or create its own.



- Arrival times for emergency crews given to this company were based only on how long it would take someone to drive to a site, not the time needed to actually alert and find personnel and vehicles.
  - Most stations have 2 to 4 personnel. If any are on vacation, ill, or at another emergency, there are less.
2. Santa Fe County is creating a Local Emergency Planning Committee, LEPC. Nominees are sent to SERC for approval. Interested residents have been told they must be members of registered organizations, will not have voting privileges, and will be subject to dismissal for cause or no cause. We didn't find this in the EPCRA federal statute for LEPCs.
  3. The Santa Fe County fire department has no alpha detectors for plutonium, the most common radioactive substance transported.
  4. In a release of radioactive plutonium, most would intuitively try to evacuate. The correct response would be to shelter-in-place so you're not outside breathing plutonium particles, which causes cancer 100% of the time. (Nobel Prize-winning International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War) No agency has told communities along the route this important information, which they need *before* a release occurs.

We have come to you to request more funding, staffing, and oversight of New Mexico's SERC. The SERC should meet several times a year and the public should have easy access to such meetings.

Quite frankly, we're terrified of the added dangers we live with. We're being exposed to new risks without the safety net of proper planning by government agencies. We're not being heard.

