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Interagency Effort to Assess Las Conchas Runoff Risks *Recommendations for Public to avoid flash-flood-prone areas*

(Santa Fe) - An Interagency Flood Risk Assessment Team (IFRAT) is coordinating environmental monitoring of stormwater runoff in areas affected by the Las Conchas fire that burned over 150,000 acres in north central New Mexico this summer. The current IFRAT is modeled after a similar group that studied environmental impacts and conducted risk assessments following the Cerro Grande fire in 2000. The core group collecting environmental samples and conducting analyses are the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED), Los Alamos National Laboratory, and the New Mexico Department of Health.

The Department of Health cautions that the most significant immediate health risk is the physical danger of flash floods, such as drowning or other injury. Following the flooding, black or gray colored water and deposits of ash-laden sediment will be obvious and should not pose a potential health risk if contacted. However-- as noted by an independent study after the 2000 Cerro Grande Fire-- as a precaution, ash should not be used as a soil amendment in gardens where food is grown in order to reduce potential increases in chronic health problems.

The results of the studies of ash-containing sediment and water conducted by the 2000 Cerro Grande IFRAT found that some samples contained above-background concentrations of several substances, primarily metals such as copper, manganese, iron, and zinc. The concentration of metals in post-fire ash is a natural result of combustion of plants and forest litter that have taken up naturally-occurring substances found in the rock and soils.

Above-background concentrations of radioactive particles were also measured and were determined to be associated with the spread of radioactive fallout from above-ground nuclear testing conducted in several countries, primarily in the 1950s and 1960s.

The earlier studies showed that ingestion of plants grown directly in ash-containing flood deposits over a long period of time (30 years) may be associated with potential increases in chronic health problems, compared to plants grown in non-ash-containing sediment. This potential risk and concern related to it can be reduced primarily by not using ash as a soil amendment in gardens in which food is grown. There was no marked difference in potential chronic health effects from swimming, fishing, or irrigation with ash-containing water versus water without ash.



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While analyses have just begun, NMED and the Department of Health expect that overall sampling results and potential risks from runoff of the Las Conchas burn area will be similar to those associated with the Cerro Grande fire.

Specific differences in potential source areas for contamination exist within areas affected by the Las Conchas fire; namely Los Alamos Canyon (contains legacy contaminants from Los Alamos National Laboratory) and Bland Canyon (contains an historic gold mining district).

Protective measures were put in place in Los Alamos Canyon following the Cerro Grande fire and these measures have been enhanced following the Las Conchas fire. The interagency Burned Area Response Team (BAER) is implementing flood mitigation measures in Bland Canyon. These canyons, several others, and the Rio Grande are being monitored following the monsoon storms. As data continue to arrive, the Departments will update this guidance as necessary.

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