EM Recovery NEWS FLASH

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Protecting Recovery Act Cleanup Site During Massive Wildfire

LOS ALAMOS, N.M. – Effective safety procedures in place at Los Alamos National Laboratory would have provided protections in the event that the raging Las Conchas fire had spread to the site of an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act project.

"Our procedures not only placed the waste excavation site, Materials Disposal Area B (MDA-B), into a safe posture so it was well protected during the fire, but also allowed us to resume work quickly," said Project Director Al Chaloupka.

The largest wildfire in New Mexico history forced the Lab to close for more than a week. While firefighters battled the fire, Recovery Act project officials were making plans to re-start the Recovery Act excavation of MDA-B when it was safe to return to Los Alamos. The Lab reopened July 6.

"Because we were excavating unknown materials that could combust or react, the facility was designed with safeguards to minimize the chance of fire and to maximize our ability to combat a fire should one erupt," Chaloupka said.

The excavation of MDA-B, made possible by $110 million in Recovery Act funding, is being done inside sturdy metal enclosures that resemble Quonset huts, which were used by the U.S. Navy to support World War II operations. The Lab's oldest waste disposal site was used from 1944 to 1948 and contained contaminated equipment and soil. Excavation of the Manhattan Project landfill is more than 90 percent complete and scheduled for completion this August.

"During the worst of the fire, we had crews and water trucks on standby, ready to saturate the area around MDA-B if requested by the incident commander," said Facility Operations Director Steve Henry. "Because the excavation procedures require portable firefighting equipment, we were ready to operate or make the equipment available to the effort if necessary."

The original design of the excavation site included removal of ground cover to reduce the risk of fire. Other safeguards include a procedure that limits fuel inside MDA-B enclosures to 100 gallons and standard operating procedures that limit the amount of flammable material inside the site.

In addition, the enclosures are equipped with fire suppression systems. Fire-resistant hydraulic fluid is used in excavation operations.

Top photo: The Las Conchas fire forced Los Alamos National Laboratory to close for more than a week.

Middle photo: A view of the Las Conchas Fire after the Lab reopened on July 6 from Material Disposal Area B.

Bottom photo: The Recovery Act-funded excavation of the Lab's oldest waste disposal site, Materials Disposal Area B, is being done inside sturdy metal enclosures.

When officials deemed it was safe to reopen the Lab, the same procedures that would have protected the excavation site from the fire allowed work to resume on a limited basis the day after the Lab reopened.

"We executed the procedures in place and brought the facility back up quickly," Henry said. "Our crews worked together to resume excavation as safely and efficiently as possible."