

COMMUNITIES FOR CLEAN WATER

Technical Assistance to Communities for Clean Water: Stormwater Management at Los Alamos National Lab

Los Alamos, New Mexico



A collaborative, community-led effort to improve stormwater management at a 40-square-mile national laboratory addresses legacy contamination and helps protect clean water for drinking, agriculture, and sacred ceremonies.

Biohabitats served as a technical expert for Communities for Clean Water (CCW), a coalition of advocacy groups—including tribal members—committed to making sure LANL’s requirements are met.

Working closely with both the coalition members and LANL’s Surface Water and Canyon Investigations Program, and following the non-confrontational, inclusive leadership style of CCW, Biohabitats participated in a multi-year collaborative effort to bring the parties together to further their mutual understanding of the cultural importance of clean water, appropriate and effective arid-region stormwater management practices, and regulatory approaches that are beneficial to all.

This involved technical review of ongoing and annual stormwater reporting, metrics, water quality, and design rationale; support in negotiation terms and intricacies for permit renewal with LANL, New Mexico Environment Department, and the US EPA; participating in technical meetings with LANL staff, site visits and walks to contaminated sites, and field stormwater BMP installations; and participating in public meetings.

With that foundation established, Biohabitats provided LANL with guidance on how to design and retrofit stormwater control sites using Low Impact Development and green infrastructure techniques that better integrate with the environment.

Initially founded to undertake the Manhattan Project during World War II, the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) now conducts scientific programs and research to ensure the safety and reliability of U.S. nuclear weapons. In past decades, activities involving the disposal of hazardous chemicals and radioactive waste were not carefully regulated. Legacy contamination from those early years exists at the site. When it rains, stormwater from LANL’s 40-square-mile campus ultimately flows to the Rio Grande, a major drinking water source and an important resource for irrigation,

livestock, recreation, and wildlife. The campus is also located within and upstream of the sacred ancestral homelands of multiple Native American Pueblo communities.

With the settlement of a Clean Water Act citizens’ lawsuit over concerns about polluted runoff, the EPA issued a new stormwater permit requiring LANL to meet stringent stormwater management requirements at over 400 legacy sites. The requirements involve improving and stabilizing stormwater controls, and monitoring runoff in order to determine whether the controls are working effectively.

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