

News & views about working at LLNL & LANL Labs

Triad National Security Is Officially Managing the Los Alamos National Laboratory

November 1st marked the date Triad National Security took over managing LANL.

Thom Mason, LANL Director and President of Triad, said “Each and every employee is critical to the success of LANL.”

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Outgoing LANL Director Terry Wallace speaks of LANL growth during his briefing to the Regional Coalition of LANL Communities (RCLC). Wallace stated LANL is now the largest National Laboratory site since the recent increase in hiring and projected the Laboratory budget to increase another \$180 million.

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New Mexico Senators and Representative work hard to maximize procurement opportunities for local businesses with Triad National Security, LLC. Senator Martin Heinrich, Senator Tom Udall and Representative Ben Ray Lujan are strong supporters of a new agreement for procurement opportunities between LANL and local businesses. [Read More](#)

The **LLNL Retirees Lawsuit** will resume in Oakland, CA on February 11, 2019 in Alameda County Superior Court under Judge Winifred Smith. [Read More](#)

Rock Fall at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) The Department of Energy initially reported that there was no radioactive waste released from the rock fall, but later retracted that statement. [Read More](#)

IS WIPP Ready to Receive 34 metric tons of surplus plutonium?

The NNSA has developed conceptual plans to place 34 metric tons of surplus plutonium at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant. Congress requested the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) evaluate and report on the impacts of NNSA’s plan. The preliminary findings were released November 30th.

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In response to our excerpt on Valley Fever in our [October 2018 publication](#), we received this letter from Dr. Watts of LLNL's Health Services Department.



Interdepartmental Letter
Environment, Safety & Health
Health Services Department

Mail Station L-723

Extension 36903

November 27, 2018

MEMORANDUM

To: Kevin Aguilar, SPSE President
From: Richard Watts, Site Occupational Medicine Director/Department Head Health Services 
Subject: **October SPSE message regarding San Joaquin Valley Fever**

I would like to provide current information regarding testing for San Joaquin Valley Fever, which was not portrayed accurately in your organization's Labs Ledger – October 2018.

Skin testing for Valley Fever was not taken away recently by the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) Health Services Department (HSD). It ended approximately 18 years ago in 1999, when the commercial skin testing product was no longer produced and was unavailable. Prior to 1999, the testing was offered, on a voluntary one-time basis, for those considering assignment at Site 300. A positive skin test indicates that an individual probably has lifelong immunity to this soil fungus, but it does not diagnose active Valley Fever infection. A blood test is necessary to determine whether someone has active Valley Fever disease.

Today, LLNL continues to educate workers of the risk of this endemic soil fungus that is widely distributed in the California Central Valley, Arizona and New Mexico. If LLNL workers, their family, or friends become ill with pneumonia like symptoms and live or work in endemic areas (including Site 300), they should ask their health care provider to do blood testing for Valley Fever. If Lawrence Livermore National Security, LLC (LLNS) workers at Site 300 develop symptoms of Valley Fever pneumonia that could be due to their work, they are encouraged to be seen in Health Services where all necessary diagnostic testing can be done.

In 2014, the FDA approved a new skin test that is commercially available. While it can be used to assess the risk of developing Valley Fever infection in healthy individuals, it is more commonly used to assess infection severity and response to treatment for patients with active Valley Fever.

I request that you publish a correction on this important health topic to your readership.

Copy:
Frances Alston
Steve Harris
Diana Larson
Valerie Dibley
Jen Szutu
Kathleen Noonan



Please excuse our error in stating that the Valley Fever Skin Test was recently taken away as an option for LLNL employees at Site 300. It is the case that the test has not been available since 1999. (For some of us, 1999 seems like only yesterday.)

When the skin test was available, it provided a tool for those employees considering a work assignment at Site 300 to factor in the potential risk of contracting Valley Fever while working at the Site—a positive skin test reaction was a good indicator that they had likely already had Valley Fever and that further incidence of the disease was not likely, while a negative response indicated they could contract the disease. The test was administered by, what would now be, the Health Services Department in LLNL’s Environment, Safety and Health organization.

A skin test for Valley Fever, Spherusol, became available again in 2014 [<https://nielsenbio.com/products/spherusol-hcp>]. Its FDA-approved usage is to assess patients with a history of pulmonary coccidioidomycosis. However, on the recommendation of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the test has been used by the State of California Corrections and Rehabilitation to determine inmate susceptibility to Valley Fever to inform prison housing determinations in areas endemic for Valley Fever for California prisoners. “[I]n early 2015, around 35,000 inmates in the California prison system took the test and roughly 9 percent were shown to be immune.” [See <https://www.kqed.org/stateofhealth/291413/california-prisons-fight-to-reduce-dangerous-valley-fever-infections-among-inmates--accessed> 1/1/2019. See also, <http://prisonlaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ValleyFeverJan2015.pdf>; and <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1078345818792679?journalCode=jcxa>]

The CDC not only had recommendations for prisoners, but also for the corrections officers. In a separate 2014 CDC report, **Evaluation of *Coccidioides* Exposures and Coccidioidomycosis Infections among Prison Employees**, the following recommendation was included:

7. Consider the use of the coccidioidal spherulin skin test on employees when it becomes commercially available. Determination of prior *Coccidioides* exposure at baseline could be valuable to each employee to evaluate his or her personal risk for disease. This determination should not be used to terminate or reassign an employee to a different job class or work location. Rather, employees should discuss test results along with other personal risk factors with their personal physicians. More research is needed on determining the sensitivity and specificity of the test, improving these characteristics, and determining how effective it may be in decreasing the burden of coccidioidomycosis among employees. Consideration in using this test should include who does the testing, how the results are used, and how often testing is done on employees.



[See <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/hhe/reports/pdfs/2013-0113-3198.pdf>]

Some initial data and conclusions have been published on the utility of the skin test for California prisoners:

Risk Stratification With Coccidioidal Skin Test to Prevent Valley Fever Among Inmates, California, 2015, Wheeler, C. MD, MPH, et al.

[<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1078345818792679?journalCode=jcxa>]. The authors conclude that “the test is safe and performing well at risk stratification... This novel use of the test might benefit other coccidioidomycosis prevention programs.”

Moreover, in August 2017, the Kern County Public Health Services Department offered the Spherusol test to the public at cost of \$77, for a one-week period. [See https://www.bakersfield.com/news/health/valley-fever-skin-test-now-offered-at-public-health-clinic/article_ff5f820c-8c42-11e7-9d23-737bc50052e9.html]. “This is a tool that we are excited to offer residents who want to know about their personal history with valley fever,” said Kern County Public Health Director Matt Constantine. “We want to empower residents to make the most informed decisions about their health.”

LLNL has the reputation of being one of the Best Places to Work, according to Glassdoor. To keep this reputation, it is important that LLNL continue to provide employees with important information about the risks of working at LLNL and providing skin testing for Valley Fever is one way LLNL can demonstrate a solid, ongoing commitment its employees’ safety and health.

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ON
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