

Scientist group holds first meeting in Carlsbad

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Chuan-Fu Wu
senior technical
adviser, Energy
Department’s
Carlsbad Field
Office

By Victoria Parker-Stevens
Current-Argus Staff Writer

CARLSBAD — International prominence and economic empowerment await Carlsbad, say organizers of the Radiochemistry Society.

More than 80 scientists and technical professionals attended the society’s “historical” first annual conference this week at the Pecos River Village Conference Center.

They came from around the country to discuss advances in, and applications of, radiochemistry. More than 30 abstracts were presented and 12 posters displayed, and 12 students received scholarships to participate.

Radiochemistry includes a number of fields, such as waste management, environmental science, radiopharmaceuticals, border issues and homeland security.

Vendors were present, and participants toured local facilities, such as the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant and the Carlsbad Environmental Monitoring and Research Center.

“Community and local organizations have been very supportive,” said society board member Chuan-Fu Wu, Ph.D., senior technical adviser for the Energy Department’s Carlsbad Field Office.

He said there was the possibility it

might return next year.

“To see major events like this at this stage of the game is proof positive of interest in the field,” said WIPP spokeswoman Jessica Hogue. “It’s international attention on the community as a whole, not just national attention on WIPP.”

The 6-month-old nonprofit society has more than 300 members so far. Meetings have also been held in Albuquerque and Washington.

In addition to supporting professionals, the society works to promote public information and education opportunities, as well as to develop

local partnerships for economic development.

Members of the Bioassay, Analytical and Environmental Radiochemistry Society, which has also met in Carlsbad, formed the society.

Board members said they were pleased with the increasing number of visits to the society's Web site — from 2,000 in January, the first month, to more than 50,000 last month.

Site visits are also coming from an enormous number of countries, said board member Larry Burchfield, Ph.D., who works for Bechtel at the Hanford federal Energy Department site in Washington, where the society is headquartered. Hanford ships waste to WIPP.

"This gives us a significant signal," he said. "You know the saying, 'Think globally; act locally'? That's exactly what's happening in Carlsbad."

At a panel meeting during the week, economic development in the region was discussed, with participants such as Mayor Bob Forrest and state Rep. John Heaton, D-Carlsbad.

"WIPP's success has set a good example," Wu said. "That momentum can be used to attract people."

Environmentalists are concerned about recent efforts to attract a number of nuclear-related activities to the area — such as a pit facility to make nuclear weapon components, a uranium enrichment plant and a facility for the manufacture of medical radioisotopes.

WINNERS

Radiochemistry Society Award Winners:

■ **Lifetime achievement:** Wendell Weart, former WIPP project director at Sandia National Laboratories; Gregory Choppin, Florida State University; and Darlene Hoffman, University of California at Berkeley.

■ **2003 Woman of Achievement:** Ines Triay, DOE Carlsbad Field Office manager, for leadership in accelerating waste shipments and safety.

■ **Organizer recognition:** Donald and Nathalie Wall, Sandia National Laboratories-Carlsbad Operations, and Jessica Hogue, Washington TRU Solutions.

But local leaders see the development of a nuclear corridor in a positive light, Wu said.

The Radiochemistry Society could be another factor to help draw endeavors to the area, he said, noting he was speaking as a board member, not a government employee.

Carlsbad's involvement in the nuclear arena also places it in a realm of increasing international importance that needs a larger workforce, society board members said.

With the post 9-11 focus on terrorism and advances in nuclear medicine, radiochemistry is a growing field, said Steven Bakhtiar, Ph.D., society president, who works for Bechtel at Hanford. But fewer and fewer students are pursuing courses of study dealing with nuclear issues.

The issue of increased demand and reduced supply was key to the formation of

the society, which would like to see students as young as middle-school age consider the field, Bakhtiar said.

This week's conference included a one-day workshop to discuss what could be done to improve the academic situation.

According to a study reported by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, 70 percent of all nuclear scientists and engineers working for the federal government will be eligible to retire in the next few years, Bakhtiar said.

As that happens, a lot of "corporate knowledge" will be lost, Wu said.

Reasons for a low interest in the field include the slow growth of the nuclear energy industry in the United States and negative public perceptions about anything "nuclear," he said.

"We need to start communicating more effectively," Bakhtiar said, noting developments in nuclear science have often occurred behind closed doors for security reasons.

"Those opposed (to the industry) tell partial stories," Wu said. "When those misperceptions are not corrected, it's bad for the country."

Some of the difficulties in the nuclear field are evidenced by considering the fact that "MRI" was originally "Nuclear Magnetic Resonance Imaging," Burchfield said.

It referred to the spinning of a nucleus, not nuclear radiation, he said, but "nuclear" was removed from the name after resistance from hospitals.

Today, the use of radioisotopes in cancer treatment is

much more prevalent in Europe than in the United States, Bakhtiar said. A radioisotope is a form of a radioactive element.

Attaching radioisotopes to antibodies targets cancer cells, unlike chemotherapy, he said.

But 90 percent of the radioisotopes used in the U.S. come from outside the country.

That is a problem because of the short half-life of the radioisotopes, which causes their effectiveness to be greatly reduced during travel time, Burchfield said.

Carlsbad's leaders have been courting a facility that would manufacture radioisotopes.

Demand for the facility's product would be high, and Carlsbad would be on the leading edge of this progressive treatment, he said.

Conference sponsors included the Energy Department, Washington TRU Solutions, Los Alamos National Laboratory, Sandia National Laboratories, CEMRC, Portage Environmental, Environmental Evaluation Group and WERC.

The conference chairman was Steve Warren, Ph.D., Washington TRU Solutions general manager, with Cliff Stroud, of LANL, as co-chair. Also lending support were the American nuclear and chemical societies. In addition to Wu, Gary Scott, Ph.D., program director of the Energy Department's National Border Technology Partnership Program in Carlsbad, sits on the society board.

On the Net:

Radiochemistry Society: www.radiochemistry.org

Gov. Silent on Pit Plant Support

The Associated Press

CARLSBAD — With the state's entire congressional delegation now behind a proposal to build a new nuclear weapons factory near here, city leaders say they are waiting on one last important endorsement.

Gov. Bill Richardson has yet to take a public position on the Energy Department's proposal to build a pit production facility at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant.

"We're patient, but we can't wait forever," Carlsbad Mayor Bob Forrest said. "We certainly need him on board."

All five members of New Mexico's congressional delegation signed a June 30 letter to Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham supporting WIPP for the Modern Pit Facility — a \$2 billion to \$4 billion factory the DOE has proposed building to make plutonium pits, the trigger for the blast in nuclear bombs.

Four other sites are under consideration, including Los Alamos National Laboratory, the Pantex Plant near Amarillo; the Nevada Test Site and the Savannah River Site in South Carolina.

"We can't wait much longer," Forrest said of Richardson's endorsement. We hope "he'll step up by the first of August."

Rep. John Heaton, D-Carlsbad, has pointed to Richardson's signature on a House memorial he introduced asking the federal government to place the project at WIPP.

"House Memorial 9 was a strong indication the governor supports us in a large way," Heaton said in June.

Richardson spokesman Gilbert Gallegos said last week the governor had not come out in favor of placing the facility in Carlsbad, nor had he spoken against it.

Richardson's chief of staff, David Contarino, said the governor would consider the issue if it progressed further.

Forrest said having the governor's support would help Carlsbad's chances.

Sen. Don Kidd, R-Carlsbad, said he understands Richardson's hesitancy.

"I think once we can present the information to him, I can't imagine him not supporting it," Kidd said, adding it would be problematic if Richardson came out opposed to it. "I think we can win him over," Kidd said.

Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham is expected to make a decision by next spring.

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Page: Web Site

UC Regents name Nanos to lead LANL

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George "Pete" Nanos always hoped he would be the director of a laboratory, but he didn't know which one.

On Thursday, the University of California Board of Regents removed the word "interim" from his title, and he became the seventh permanent director of Los Alamos National Laboratory

"Obviously, I'm extremely pleased," Nanos said in a telephone conference from Washington, DC, Thursday afternoon.

A retired admiral, working at the laboratory as a senior official, Nanos was called into service as interim director on Jan. 6 by UC President Richard Atkinson and told to get the job done.

"From Day 1, President Atkinson looked me in the eye and said, 'Do what you need to do. Look like you own the place and make it happen,'" recalled Nanos.

His permanent appointment rewards what Atkinson called, "bold and innovative leadership as interim director."

Among Nanos' first tasks, in his memorable phrase, was "to drain the swamp." "It took us five months to get to the bottom and find out there are no alligators," he said Thursday.

He credited the lab workforce's fundamental honesty for not having taken advantage of weak "processes and controls."

On closer inspection, most of the apparent problems and abuses have been found to be much smaller than they appeared to be late last year, when top managers resigned and a frenzy of internal reviews, independent audits, and federal investigations began.

"The scandals are behind us," Nanos said.

How permanent his directorship will be depends primarily on the challenge he faces over the next two years.

The Department of Energy decided to put UC's management contract up for competition before it expires Sept. 30, 2005. UC's regents and new president, Bob Dynes, will first have to decide if the university intends to vie for the contract.

That will depend, Nanos said, on how DOE structures the competition.

"When you say competition, you have to say for what," he said, and the request for proposal and criteria by which it will be evaluated have not been determined.

Nanos said he will pursue a policy of "excellence in all things," and if he is successful, will have in reality what any competitor could only have on paper.

Signaling continuing improvement in management structures and processes, the laboratory also announced Thursday the creation of two new high-level offices.

A new laboratory policy office, with M. Diana Webb named director, is designed to consolidate what Nanos called, "out of date, inconsistent and fragmented guidance."

A second new entity with Ping Lee named office director, will be a planning and evaluation office.

Nanos said the new office will not only help develop a strategic plan, but also track how well it is being carried out.

"It will aid me in knowing whether my organization is delivering what we want it to do," he said.