

# Rocky Mountain Laboratories: An Inquiry into Community Opposition to a Biosafety Level IV Expansion

By Darr Tucknott, Masters of Sociology thesis project, University of Montana, May 2006

## Summary:

This study explores the perspectives of community members opposed to a federal biolaboratory expansion at Rocky Mountain Laboratories in Hamilton, Montana. The biolaboratory expansion includes the construction of Biosafety Level IV laboratories, which are facilities equipped to study the most deadly infectious diseases known to man. The biolaboratory expansion is funded by federal bioterrorism research monies so that potential bioterrorist biological agents may be studied in this expanded facility.

High risk hazardous facilities are defined as those that rely on technology and evoke high levels of dread. Community reaction to high risk hazardous facilities, including hazardous waste, nuclear, and mining facilities, has been widely examined. However, community response to biolaboratories, potentially another type of a high risk hazardous facility, has yet to be examined. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the degree to which a biolaboratory may be perceived as another type of a high risk hazardous facility. This exploratory study examines if participants' opposition to a biolaboratory reflects previous findings on community response to other types of high risk hazardous facilities.

In-depth interviews with 10 community members opposed to the biolaboratory expansion allowed me to explore their perspectives on this unexamined topic. The data collected from these in-depth interviews were analyzed by content analysis that included two stages: open coding and axial coding. The results of this process revealed that various themes were found to characterize participants' opposition to the biolaboratory expansion. These multidimensional themes included a negative perception of the expansion approval process, distrust in institutional authority, a negative perception of potential risks, and distrust in the justification for bioterrorism research. Unidimensional themes included a negative perception of the equity of expansion and a perceived lack of economic benefits from the expansion. However, the extent to which each theme influenced each participant's opposition varied.

Participants' opposition to the biolaboratory expansions was found to reflect other community responses to high risk hazardous facilities. Unlike previously determined community responses to high risk hazardous facilities, participants' opposition was characterized by a strong negative perception of the public process and questioning of bioterrorism research. Thus, the results of this exploratory study suggest that to some extent community residents perceive biolaboratories as a unique type of a high risk hazardous facility.