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James C. Kenney, Cabinet Secretary

NEWS RELEASE
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Contact: Jorge Estrada, Public Relations Coordinator
New Mexico Environment Department
505.690.5326 | jorge.estrada@env.nm.gov*The Environment Department's mission is to protect and restore the environment and to foster a healthy and prosperous New Mexico for present and future generations.***NMED reaches settlement with NM Highlands University**
University to provide hazardous waste education, pay penalties

SANTA FE — The New Mexico Environment Department reached a settlement on February 4, 2026, with New Mexico Highlands University after inspectors discovered corroded chemical containers and hazardous waste violations that posed risks to students and staff at the school's Ivan Hilton Science Building.

NMED received a complaint in September 2024 alleging that New Mexico Highlands University was mismanaging hazardous waste at the Ivan Hilton Science Building on campus.

When NMED conducted an inspection, inspectors observed several improperly stored containers of outdated chemicals, some of which had deteriorated to the point that chemicals had corroded through their containers.

These violations included failure to properly track and characterize hazardous waste, exceeding allowable storage time limits, and other deficiencies. A significant contributing factor to the violations was the lack of appropriate hazardous waste management training for personnel, which itself constituted a regulatory violation.

NMED worked closely with the university to address the immediate safety risks and remediate the Ivan Hilton Science Building. This effort included coordination with the Las Vegas Fire Department to safely detonate several unstable chemical containers at an approved off-site location. NMED also provided guidance to help the university redevelop its hazardous waste management program, including conducting a training seminar for Highlands staff.

“When hazardous waste is not properly managed, it puts students, staff, first responders, and the surrounding community at risk,” said **Dr. Kyle Staggs, Bureau Chief of NMED's Resource Protection Compliance and Enforcement Bureau**. “This settlement reflects both the seriousness of the violations and NMED's commitment to ensuring institutions have the tools, training, and accountability needed to protect public health and the environment.”

Under the settlement, the university will pay \$391,061 in penalties. In addition, the university will conduct outreach on New Mexico Environment Department's behalf with New Mexico high schools to provide consultation and education on proper hazardous waste management practices for schools.

New Mexico Highlands University has since addressed most violations and implemented corrective actions, including closing the Ivan Hilton Science Building, completing hazardous waste cleanup and disposal, establishing new safety positions, updating procedures and centralizing control of chemical inventory and hazardous waste management.

This settlement should serve as a clear warning that hazardous waste violations in schools will be taken seriously and met with strong enforcement. Moving forward, NMED will closely oversee compliance efforts and follow up on every complaint or whistleblower report regarding hazardous materials or suspected spills to protect students, staff, and communities.

The full settlement can be found here: <https://bit.ly/4kxxwvt>

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