



Los Alamos Study Group

Nuclear Disarmament • Environmental Protection • Social Justice • Economic Sustainability

Presentation

to the

Radioactive and Hazardous Materials Committee of the New Mexico Legislature

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Production Expectations vs. Site Realities and Worker Safety at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL): A Recipe for Regional Decline

Summary

Proposals to expand nuclear materials missions at LANL run afoul of basic realities at the site and of LANL as an institution. In pursuit of these expanded missions, corners are already being cut that would affect worker safety and operational success. The old tug-of-war between worker safety and the environment, and production expectations, has begun again.

LANL's planning and engineering for expanded plutonium missions have been unsound and marked by failure since the 1980s. They continue to be so today for reasons largely independent of particular contractors and managers. Assurances which cannot be enforced by the state – and none of LANL's can – should not be accepted at face value. Federal oversight and accountability are thin at LANL; external regulation is almost nonexistent. New mechanisms of federal and state accountability are badly needed.

National production mandates for plutonium warhead cores (“pits”) – arbitrary, since they are not necessary to support the US nuclear arsenal – are now codified by statute. They are virtually certain to conflict with operational safety at LANL. They would also add to the site's environmental burdens, as well as conflict with existing missions. All the ingredients for fiasco (and for some, tragedy) are again present – as they have been at LANL, repeatedly.

Northern New Mexico would not benefit from industrial plutonium missions under any scenario.

Industrial and governmental activities which require or benefit from relative isolation invariably cause regional decline. The mirage of “jobs” inevitably turns to economic and social development dust, even though a few people are employed. The causes of this are more-or-less universal and well-understood.

In Washington, increased funding for nuclear weapons (and hence New Mexico's labs), along with an expanded pit production mission at LANL, may require the New Mexico delegation to go along with (or moderate their opposition to) consolidated interim storage of spent nuclear reactor fuel in southern New Mexico. Both proposals are examples of federal/contractor “pollution shopping.” Many powerful parties find New Mexico to be an attractive, sparsely-populated, politically-weak “option” for industries that amenity-oriented states with positive reputations which they seek to protect would reject in a heartbeat.

At LANL, a powerful confluence of contractor greed, pork-barrel politics, and Cold War ideology, operating through long-obsolete, unaccountable, and secretive management structures with a slick public relations veneer, is in effect asking Northern New Mexico to double down on a Cold War past that has served the region poorly. We are in a new historical moment, one not of our choosing but one which has opportunities as well as challenges. LANL is heading into the past. New Mexico can't afford to do that.

Chairman Steinborn and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. Please accept if you can my apologies for not providing a copy of my presentation in advance. I grossly misjudged the time needed for preparation and have not even now completed it. I will have to send a more complete version to Ms. Casebier tonight or tomorrow.

I will begin with an overall summary of my concerns, which is the top item in your packet, and then will delve somewhat more deeply using slides for most topics, hard copies of which are in your packet for future reference, as we will only be able to touch upon some of the details.

I am looking forward to your questions and will try to answer them to the best of my ability.

Although I will be critical of Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) and other institutions, I mean no lack of respect toward individuals. I think it is our common experience that bureaucracies and corporations are, in the common way of putting it, “faceless,” and generally less astute, selfless, and wise than the people in and around them.

This bears on my central point today. LANL and the federal entities which fund and direct its mission – namely the Department of Energy (DoE), Department of Defense (DoD) through the Nuclear Weapons Council (NWC), and the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) – have agendas which are not designed to serve the region or New Mexico, which have hurt the state and its people, and which are poised to hurt us still further.

Our topics will be, with approximate time allotments, as follows.

(With slides today)

1. LANL production mandates, current and proposed (2 minutes)
2. NNSA’s 2017 and 2018 pit production analyses (2 minutes)
3. Realities of the LANL site (3 minutes)
4. LANL worker safety: on a collision course with powerful other agendas (4 minutes)

(Without slides today, following shortly)

5. Environmental liabilities: decreasing, or increasing? (2 minutes)
6. A recipe for regional decline (3 minutes)
7. What can be done? (3 minutes)

Thank you for your attention.

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