

Investigation

Bush budget plan would benefit New Mexico labs

By JEFF TOLLEFSON
The New Mexican

The Bush administration is proposing across-the-board increases in federal defense spending, a trend that is likely to boost record budgets at the nation's nuclear laboratories to even higher levels next year.

If Congress goes along, the U.S. Department of Energy would spend \$3.8 billion — an increase of \$190 million — at its main facilities in New Mexico next year, according to the budget proposal rolled out by the Bush administration on Monday.

That figure includes \$1.7 billion at Los Alamos National Laboratory (an increase of \$142 million over last year's request), \$1.5 billion at Sandia National Laboratories (an increase of \$106 million) and \$225 million at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (an increase of \$4 million), according to figures provided by U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M.

Despite Monday's unveiling of the administration's budget proposals for next year, Congress has yet to pass this year's appropriations bill to fund the labs and other federal activities. For the past several months, the labs have been operating under a continuing resolution that temporarily

keeps the bills until Congress can complete its work.

DOE proposed to spend \$6.4 billion on Stockpile Stewardship, a program intended to maintain the nation's nuclear weapons without nuclear testing. The budget proposal would increase spending on the program by about \$538 million over the president's request for the current fiscal year and \$269 million over the Senate's appropriations bill.

Domenici called the president's budget the "best that we have had, ever, since we started the program that we call science-based Stockpile Stewardship."

The budget proposal for Los Alamos includes \$50 million to begin construction of a new National Security Science Building as well as \$21 million to begin work on a replacement for the Chemical and Metallurgy Research Facility, according to Domenici.

The budget proposal includes \$320 million, up \$84 million over last year's request and \$33 million over the Senate appropriation, for the current plutonium-pit production program at Los Alamos. The project is billed as a small-scale, experimental effort to produce and certify the first plutonium pit — the heart of a modern thermonuclear bomb — since

DOE shut down its Rocky Flats facility in Colorado a decade ago.

By 2007, when the first pit is scheduled for completion, Los Alamos will have spent \$1.7 billion on the program. Addressing skepticism, Los Alamos officials have said the program is especially difficult because no one has ever had to certify a nuclear weapon without an explosion.

For nuclear activists such as Greg Mello, who heads the Los Alamos Study Project, the project raises serious questions about DOE's nuclear-weapons program.

"They used to make pits all the time. Why they can't make one now is a little beyond my imagination," Mello said. He believes the lab is either squandering the money or building up a larger pit program that would be capable of producing triggers for entirely new bomb designs.

In general, nuclear activists were quick to question defense increases in the proposed budget. They cite an increased emphasis on nuclear weapons in the nation's defense policies, efforts to design a new nuclear bomb, increasing talk of a return to nuclear testing and the administration's proposal to build a new facility for manufacturing plutonium triggers.

Monitor
2/9/03

The Update

Senator touts facility as site for plutonium pit plant

By BETSY BLANEY

Associated Press Writer

The Pantex nuclear facility in Amarillo would be the ideal choice for a new site to develop plutonium pits that provide trigger material for nuclear bombs, U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said Wednesday.

Several facilities, including two in New Mexico, are vying to become home for the Department of Energy's proposed Modern Pit Facility. The facility would process, manufacture and assemble plutonium pits for use at Pantex.

Pantex is the nation's primary assembly and disassembly plant for nuclear warheads and currently repackages old plutonium pits to meet new safety standards. Pantex stores more than 12,000 plutonium pits.

Other possible sites are the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad; Los Alamos National Laboratory; Nevada Test Site; and Savannah River Site in South Carolina.

Los Alamos is developing an interim pit production facility that will begin making as many as 50 certified plutonium pits a year by 2007.

"Building the MPF at Pantex would eliminate the need to transport the plutonium pits, increasing safety, and reducing environmental concerns," Cornyn said in a news release. "Pantex is the most cost-effective site in the nuclear weapons program, and every operation is designed to protect human health and safety, the environment, and against the threat of theft or accidental exposure."

But some people who live nearby don't want Pantex to get the facility, which would create about 1,000 jobs.

"We do not need to build those (pits) in an area that is primarily agricultural, breadbasket to the world, and over a major aquifer," said Jeri Osborne, who lives near the plant and calls Cornyn's safety claims "hogwash."

"We've got problems with the Ogallala Aquifer already," she said, referring to contamination and depletion of the aquifer.

The environmental group Greenpeace also has opposed plans to build the pit facility.

But Cornyn, who serves on the Senate Armed Services Committee's Strategic Forces subcommittee and the Environment and the Public Works Committee's subcommittee responsible for nuclear safety, says safety is the key attraction for Pantex.

He met Tuesday with acting administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration, Linton S. Brooks, and wrote a letter outlining benefits of locating the MPF in the Panhandle.

The facility would begin initial operations in 2018, with full production slated for 2020.

It would have a production capacity of at least 125 pits annually and the ability to expand as needed.

The United States' pit production operations were shut down in 1989 at the energy department's Rocky Flats facility near Denver in response to alleged violations of environmental statutes that were made after a raid by the FBI and the Environmental Protection Agency, according to the EPA's Web site.

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Los Alamos National Laboratory has built the first nuclear pit — the heart of a modern thermonuclear bomb — in nearly 14 years, officials announced Tuesday.

“Los Alamos National Laboratory has restored the nation’s ability to make nuclear weapons,” said Pete Nanos, interim director of the lab. “It will now be up to the Department of Energy to examine our work very carefully, which they will do over the next few weeks.”

Nanos joined Linton Brooks, chief of nuclear weapons for the U.S. Department of Energy, in making the announcement during the lab’s 60th-anniversary celebrations Tuesday.

The lab must now work on the certification process to ensure that any new pits will work before they are placed in the stockpile. Around 700 to 800 employees are working on the project. The first certified pit, ready for use in the Trident Submarine’s W-88 warhead, is scheduled for completion by 2007 at a cost of more than \$1.5 billion.

The United States has been unable to build nuclear pits since 1989, when DOE shut down Rocky Flats in Colorado. In 1996, DOE decided to re-establish an interim pit-manufacturing center at Technical Area 55 in Los Alamos. It has taken six years to produce the first certifiable pit.

“From 1989 to today, we were the only nuclear power that couldn’t make pits. ... Now we have that capability,” Brooks said, stressing that DOE is not planning to build new weapons.

“What it means is that we now have the capability if something goes wrong with the stockpile to fix it,” he said. “That is what Stockpile Stewardship is all about: being able to diagnose problems and being able to do something about them.”

The Stockpile Stewardship program is billed as an effort to maintain the nuclear arsenal without testing, which was halted in 1992 as the Cold War came to an end.

Lab officials say the nuclear-testing moratorium, combined with new environmental regulations that banned the use of certain chemicals and processes used at Rocky Flats, has made the pit-manufacturing process more difficult than it used to be. All of the lab’s tools — from supercomputers to materials analysis and X-ray imaging of mock tests — will be put to work on the process, since certifying a nuclear pit without nuclear testing is similar to certifying an entire nuclear weapon.

Greg Mello, a nuclear-disarmament activist with the **Los Alamos Study Group**, greeted Tuesday’s announcement with skepticism. He noted that the United States has about 23,000 pits — 10,600 in the current nuclear arsenal and an additional 12,000 to 14,000 pits stockpiled at DOE’s Pantex plant in Amarillo, Texas.

“It would be nice if Los Alamos declared victory and put this program on the back burner, because we don’t need new pits,” he said.

As far as the W-88 warhead goes, lab officials have said Rocky Flats failed to make enough spare pits before closing. The lab says it plans to build about six pits annually from now until 2007.

Along with Carlsbad, Los Alamos is one of five sites in the running for a "modern pit facility." Scheduled for completion by 2020, this permanent plant could cost anywhere from \$2 billion to \$4 billion and would be capable of manufacturing at least 250 pits annually, according to DOE.

Brooks said his agency expects to make a decision on the placement of the facility next year. In an initial DOE review, Los Alamos ranked as the best site for such a facility. Los Alamos officials, however, have repeatedly said they see the lab more in terms of nuclear-weapons research than large-scale manufacturing.

Tuesday's celebrations also included the dedication of the Nonproliferation and International Security Center. The facility cost \$54 million and will house about 400 employees working on everything from nuclear-security agreements with Russia to the development of new ways to detect nuclear materials.

Author: JEFF TOLLEFSON

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Page: A-5

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LANL On List to Make Nuke Pits

Adam Rankin Journal Staff Writer

Carlsbad Area's WIPP Considered

A report released Monday confirms that the federal government wants to build a new nuclear weapons plant but does not say whether the facility should be located at Los Alamos, near Carlsbad or three other sites under consideration around the country.

The Department of Energy and National Nuclear Security Administration officials have decided to delay announcing a preferred location for the proposed "Modern Pit Facility," which would make the plutonium triggers for nuclear bombs.

"(The preferred site) will be in the final environmental impact statement," said NNSA spokesman Bryan Wilkes.

He said the report made public Monday -- a draft environmental impact statement -- "just basically says these are the five places we are considering and we are holding public meetings so you can tell us what you think."

The proposed nuclear weapons plant would build replacement plutonium "triggers," or pits, for the existing arsenal and would be operational by 2020, producing between 125 to 450 pits per year.

The potential sites include Los Alamos National Laboratory; the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad; the Pantex facility near Amarillo; the Nevada Test Site; and the Savannah River weapons complex in South Carolina.

"All locations have strengths and weaknesses and there is not one that is grandly above the rest and that is the whole reason for this NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) process," Wilkes said.

Since the Rocky Flats plant near Denver was closed in 1989, the U.S. has been unable to manufacture pits. An interim facility at Los Alamos, designed to produce about 20 pits per year, was initiated in 1996 and is expected to be fully operational by 2007. LANL produced its first potentially "certifiable" pit in April.

Issue of security

DOE officials argue starting work now on a new pit facility is prudent risk management, should the pits in reserve and in the nuclear arsenal degrade quicker than expected. The "life-span" of existing pits is estimated at about 45 to 60 years and the average age of pits in the arsenal is about 19 years, according to DOE.

"This issue is an important one since it deals directly with the national security of the U.S. and our ability to keep our nuclear stockpile safe, reliable and secure," Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham said in a prepared statement.

Monday's draft environmental impact statement said a new facility is required to produce enough pits to meet future contingencies and to build all the necessary types of pits -- possibly including new designs -- in a relatively short period of time.

The new facility would cost between \$2.2 billion and \$4.4 billion depending on its capacity and would require about 80 acres of land, the report says.

Construction would generate between 770 and 1,100 jobs, and between 990 and 1,800 jobs are expected during its 50-year operation.

Once a location is identified, a site-specific environmental analysis will be conducted to determine the exact location of the new facility at the preferred site, Wilkes said.

Carlsbad Mayor Bob Forrest said the proposed facility could take up the economic slack for his town after WIPP closes, which is scheduled to take place in about 15 years.

Public comment

Anti-nuclear activists and critics of the proposed Modern Pit Facility say they are concerned the delay in naming the preferred site for the new plant will reduce the volume and quality of public comment on the proposed facility.

"They advertised that step one was whether to proceed, and if so where to locate it," said Jay Coghlan, director of Santa Fe-based Nuclear Watch New Mexico. "We already knew they wanted to build it, so they confirmed that, but they made no site selection."

"It makes one's comments a crap shoot," said Greg Mello, head of the Los Alamos Study Group, a nuclear watchdog. "Some might choose not to comment," he said, because they don't know whether their comments are really necessary, since they don't know whether the plant will be located in their area.

"I think it is an abridgement of the process set up by Congress and DOE's own NEPA regulations," he said. "It is a political move by the department -- they are supposed to play this game in a straighter way than they are."

Wilkes explained that while there will be no formal public hearings after issuance of the final environmental impact statement, the public can submit comments at any time, including during a monthlong period after the site is announced.

"The process is long enough that everyone will get a chance to have a voice in it," Wilkes said. "It just allows for a more thorough decision-making process."

Critics say the draft environmental impact statement confirms their suspicions that the Bush administration is looking at building new types of nuclear weapons and on a large scale. Both houses of Congress have given approval to renewing research on development of so-called "mini-nukes."

The document leaves open the possibility of manufacturing more than 450 pits per year, a rate Mello says is unnecessary given recent disarmament treaties signed with Russia.

"The ultimate justification for this facility is making weapons of new design primarily and secondarily maintaining a very large arsenal on the assumption that (disarmament treaties) don't require destruction of arms," he said.

The impact statement found one alternative to a new facility could be upgrading LANL's Technical Area 55, site of the current interim pit manufacturing facility, so that it could produce 80 pits a year.

"This provides a 'hedge' in the event of unforeseeable changes in stockpile size or pit lifetime result(ing) in a significantly smaller pit production capacity requirement," according to the document.

Public hearings on the draft environmental impact statement will be held June 30 in Carlsbad at the DOE's Carlsbad office and July 1 at the Cities of Gold Hotel in Pojoaque.

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N.M. In Line For Weapons Plant

Adam Rankin Journal Northern Bureau

Site To Develop Plutonium Pits

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Nuke Plant Site Still In Question

Adam Rankin Journal Northern Bureau

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Activists dominate hearing on possible nuclear-pit factory in Los Alamos or Carlsbad

POJOAQUE PUEBLO Dozens of loud and often unruly demonstrators on Tuesday protested a new nuclear-weapons factory under consideration by the U.S. Department of Energy.

Both Carlsbad and Los Alamos National Laboratory are on the list of possible sites for the proposed Modern Pit Facility. The manufacturing plant would purify and cast plutonium into round "pits" similar to the bomb dropped on Nagasaki at the end of World War II.

The orbs of plutonium - a highly dangerous substance developed for nuclear bombs - provide the initial explosion, triggering further nuclear reactions, in a modern thermonuclear weapon.

The National Nuclear Security Administration, a DOE branch in charge of nuclear weapons, is conducting an environmental impact statement analyzing whether and where to build the Modern Pit Facility, estimated to cost between \$2 billion and \$4 billion. Tuesday's hearing, dominated by anti-nuclear activists, was one of several in an ongoing series.

While much of the discussion focused on international efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons, many also cited environmental and safety concerns associated with plutonium.

Sue Dayton, an activist with the Albuquerque-based watchdog group Citizen Action, questioned DOE's interpretation of its own information on the risk to nuclear workers at such a facility.

A DOE risk analysis in the environmental impact statement indicates that radiation could cause a fatal case of cancer in one worker every five years in a facility with 1,100 workers capable of producing 450 pits annually.

DOE's Jay Rose downplayed these statistics as highly conservative estimates involving a large number of people. Workers at the proposed site would receive one-tenth the annual radiation allowed under DOE regulations and would, individually, incur an extremely low risk, he said in an interview.

"Do we think that every four or five years a worker will get a latent cancer? Absolutely not," he said, citing DOE estimates that a worker would have to work 4,500 years before getting a lethal form of cancer.

DOE documents also indicate that a modern pit facility, depending on its size, would produce between 3,000 and 5,600 drums of plutonium laden nuclear waste annually.

Many at the hearing questioned the need for more bombs in the first place, pointing out that the United States agreed to bring its nuclear arsenal below 2,200 weapons in the coming decade. Miles Nelson, assistant medical director for the Emergency Department at St. Vincent Hospital, said the proposal flies in the face of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and other international agreements meant to head off nuclear weapons.

"I believe this modern pit facility violates the promises we have made to the rest of the world," Nelson said.

DOE officials insist that the nation has a right to maintain its current arsenal.

The United States has been unable to build pits since DOE shut down its only pit facility at Rocky Flats near Denver in 1989. Although Los Alamos National Laboratory expects to be able to build a limited number of new pits by 2007, DOE officials maintain that the United States needs a full-scale pit production facility to replace aging nuclear warheads and potentially build new ones.

DOE estimates that the current nuclear warheads will last a minimum of 45 to 60 years, so the modern pit facility should be operational by 2020 in case problems arise in the stockpile. None has been found as of yet, but DOE officials say there is no way to predict the future.

Mary Riseley, a founder of the **Los Alamos Study Group** who is no longer active in the group, said a study by a University of California physicist indicated that pits might actually improve with age. She cited that as evidence that there is no need to build a facility now.

The agency wants the facility operational by 2020. Also on the list of potential sites for the modern pit facility are the Savannah River Site in South Carolina; the Nevada Test Site; and the Pantex Site near Amarillo, Texas.

According to the current schedule, DOE expects to make a decision whether to move forward, and if so where to put the facility, by April 2004. DOE would further consider environmental impacts at the site chosen and decide how big the facility will be in a second analysis.

DOE will accept comments on the proposal through Aug. 5. Write to the MPF EIS Document Manager, U.S. Department of Energy/NNSA, 1000 Independence Ave. S.W., Washington, D.C. 20585; fax (202) 586-5324; or submit comments via e-mail at the Modern Pit Facility Internet site, <http://www.mpfeis.com>.

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Page: A-1

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Lawmakers' Fiat Shocks Activists

Adam Rankin Journal Staff Writer

* State's congressional delegates all signed letter backing Carlsbad for new nuke factory

Many anti-nuclear activists were surprised to learn that all five of New Mexico's congressional delegates recently signed a letter endorsing Carlsbad as the proposed site of a new nuclear weapons factory.

"Everybody is a little shocked by (Sen. Jeff Bingaman) and majorly shocked by (Rep. Tom Udall)," said Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group.

In a strong, bipartisan show of support, Democrats Bingaman and Udall, along with their Republican counterparts, Sen. Pete Domenici and Reps. Heather Wilson and Steve Pearce, signed a June 30 letter to Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham supporting Carlsbad as the proposed location of the "Modern Pit Facility," a \$2 billion to \$4 billion factory under consideration by the Department of Energy.

For the people of Carlsbad, many of whom are in favor of hosting the facility, the endorsements are political capital in a decision that may come down to politics and which community most favors the project.

The pit facility, which could be sited at Los Alamos, Carlsbad or three other locations, would build plutonium "triggers," or pits, to replace the nation's aging nuclear stockpile. The pits set off a larger, second-stage blast in nuclear weapons.

But Bingaman and Udall only signed the letter on the condition that it contain a qualifier.

"It was originally written as if the Modern Pit Facility was a foregone conclusion," said Udall spokesman Glen Loveland. "Congressman Udall insisted that we add an initial paragraph that says they should consider Carlsbad only if it is found this facility is really needed."

In the final version of the letter to Abraham, the second sentence now reads: "If it is determined such a facility is necessary, we believe the WIPP site in Carlsbad, New Mexico, provides the best option ... "

"We just wanted to stress the debate is still going on, and no final decisions have been made," Loveland said. "We know they don't want it in northern New Mexico, and at this point, that is our primary concern."

In Bingaman's case, he also wrote a separate letter to Abraham expanding on the group's statement.

"If the Department determines that such a facility is necessary, and has carefully informed the public and the Congress of all the safety, environmental and fiscal consequences of the Facility, then I believe that the WIPP facility at Carlsbad should be seriously considered as the best option for its location," Bingaman wrote.

Domenici spokesman Chris Gallegos and a policy official with Pearce said both lawmakers considered the language added by Udall and Bingaman to be implicit in the original wording because the pit facility is not a certainty. The final decision rests with Abraham.

Regardless of the qualifiers, Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce President Mark Schinnerer said having all five delegates sign the letter translates into "tremendous support."

Having the pit facility "would be a big economic boost, not just for Carlsbad," but for neighboring communities, such as Hobbs, he said.

Hosting the pit facility would mean an infusion of cash and jobs -- yearly operations are estimated to cost \$200 million to \$300 million, and the facility would support about 1,000 jobs over a 50-year period -- at a time when Carlsbad's other government mainstay, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, is scheduled to begin closing.

But New Mexico's delegates should be thinking about more than economic or community development when it comes to endorsing such weighty projects, said Joni Arends with Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety.

"The congressional delegates should be looking at these larger issues -- like violations of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty -- before they start endorsing sites," she said.

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Lawmakers' Support Shocks Groups

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"We just wanted to stress the debate is still going on, and no final decisions have been made," Loveland said. "We know they don't want it in northern New Mexico, and at this point, that is our primary concern."

In Bingaman's case, he also wrote a separate letter to Abraham expanding on the group's statement.

"If the Department determines that such a facility is necessary, and has carefully informed the

public and the Congress of all the safety, environmental and fiscal consequences of the Facility, then I believe that the WIPP facility at Carlsbad should be seriously considered as the best option for its location," Bingaman wrote.

Domenici spokesman Chris Gallegos and a policy official with Pearce said both lawmakers considered the language added by Udall and Bingaman to be implicit in the original wording because the pit facility is not a certainty. The final decision rests with Abraham.

Regardless of the qualifiers, Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce President Mark Schinnerer said having all five delegates sign the letter translates into "tremendous support."

Having the pit facility "would be a big economic boost, not just for Carlsbad" but for neighboring communities, such as Hobbs, he said.

Hosting the pit facility would mean an infusion of cash and jobs -- yearly operations are estimated to cost \$200 million to \$300 million, and the facility would support about 1,000 jobs over a 50-year period -- at a time when Carlsbad's other government mainstay, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, is scheduled to begin closing.

But New Mexico's delegates should be thinking about more than economic or community development when it comes to endorsing such weighty projects, said Joni Arends with Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety.

"The congressional delegates should be looking at these larger issues -- like violations of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty -- before they start endorsing sites," she said.

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Title: WEAPONS BUDGET UP \$367 MILLION
Author: JEFF TOLLEFSON
Date: November 9, 2003
Section: Santa Fe/El Norte
Page: B-1

Bill will pay for nuclear-weapons work at LANL

Congressional conferees agreed on a \$27.3 billion appropriations bill that funds everything from nuclear-stockpile work at national labs to water projects throughout the West, U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., announced last week.

The bill provides \$22.1 billion to the U.S. Department of Energy, including more than \$6.3 billion for work on the nuclear-weapons stockpile at Los Alamos and the other two primary nuclear-weapons laboratories, according to Domenici, who led the negotiations on the Senate side as chairman of the Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittee.

Domenici spokesman Chris Gallegos could not provide a breakdown on the total budget for Los Alamos lab, but Gallegos said the \$6.3 billion would be split fairly equally among Los Alamos, Sandia National Laboratories and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California.

The bill boosts the nuclear-stockpile budget by \$367 million while providing nearly \$1.4 billion, an increase of \$196 million, for nuclear-nonproliferation activities within DOE.

"We've done a good job to craft a bill that meets the national-security mission needs for our labs and moves the nation forward in terms of water projects," Domenici said in a statement.

Los Alamos funding includes \$50 million for the new headquarters building and \$10 million for preliminary work to replace the Chemical and Metallurgy Research Facility. The bill provides \$230.5 million to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant and DOE's field office in Carlsbad.

Nuclear activists were upbeat about one provision in the bill: Congress cut by more than half the funding for preliminary studies on the Modern Pit Facility, a multibillion-dollar factory that DOE is proposing to build new pits, or cores, for nuclear bombs.

Jay Coghlan, who heads Nuclear Watch of New Mexico, cited that as evidence the proposal could be defeated.

The agreement also cut funding for research into the "Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator," the so-called nuclear bunker buster, from \$15 million to \$7.5 million.

The legislation provides nearly \$25 million for DOE to shorten the time that would be necessary to conduct a nuclear test, if such a decision were made.

While the administration sought to shorten that schedule to 18 months, the bill stipulates that DOE should work toward a 24-month "test-readiness" capability.

Meanwhile, a conference-committee agreement on separate Defense Department legislation last week repealed a decade-long prohibition on research into low-yield nuclear weapons, often called mininukes or battlefield nukes. Although Congress ultimately must sign off on any new projects,

the decision opens the door to research and development of new bombs, said Greg Mello, who heads the **Los Alamos Study Group**.

"The biggest, clearest signal to the lab and to the world is that they can make mininukes now, and they will want to do that," he said.

"Everybody should sit up and take notice that these aren't weapons which are designed not to be used. The reason they are being requested is that their use is said to be credible. That's why they are supposedly a better deterrent against small tyrants."

The energy and water appropriations bill provides \$35 million to the Bureau of Reclamation for various work along the Rio Grande, \$3 million for desalination research in Otero County and funding to the Army Corps of Engineers for work throughout New Mexico.

Both the Senate and House must approve the conference-committee report, which will then be sent to the president.

Author: JEFF TOLLEFSON

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Page: B-1

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Nuke Factory Funding Cut Worries Agency

John Fleck Journal Staff Writer

* Two N.M. cities considered for plutonium plant

The National Nuclear Security Administration is wrestling with a deep cut in the fiscal year 2004 budget for construction of a factory to build plutonium parts for nuclear weapons. Two New Mexico cities are being considered as sites for the factory.

The Bush Administration asked Congress for \$23 million for the plant, but at the end of complex negotiations over the nuclear weapons budget, House and Senate appropriators agreed to give the project only \$11 million in fiscal year 2004.

"We're assessing the situation," said NNSA spokesman Bryan Wilkes.

Rep. Dave Hobson, R-Ohio, pushed for the cuts. The chairman of the House subcommittee in charge of the DOE's budget, Hobson has expressed repeated skepticism about the size of the nuclear weapons budget.

"Unfortunately, the Department of Energy continues to ask Congress to fund a Cold War nuclear arsenal, and the nuclear weapons complex necessary to maintain that arsenal, even though we no longer face a Cold War adversary. The Cold War ended over a decade ago," Hobson said during a July 8 hearing.

Carlsbad and Los Alamos are among five sites around the country being considered for the project, which has been estimated to cost as much as \$5 billion.

Carlsbad leaders are lobbying heavily to try to win the project because of the jobs it would create, while officials at Los Alamos National Laboratory have said they don't want it.

Supporters and critics of the plant say they expect the budget cut to have little effect because the money was only for early planning. Actual high-dollar construction is still years away.

"This will have very little impact on actual schedule," said Alex Flint, a senior aide to Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M.

Greg Mello, head of the anti-nuclear Los Alamos Study Group and a leading critic of the plant, agreed that the budget cut was not likely to significantly delay the project.

The NNSA is in the midst of a lengthy environmental study required under federal law. Actual construction of the plant was not scheduled to begin until 2011, with bomb-making not to begin until some time around 2018.

Government backers of the project say it is needed to replace aging plutonium parts in U.S. nuclear weapons. The parts used to be made at the Rocky Flats plant in Colorado, which was closed in 1989 because of environmental problems.

Critics say the plant is an unnecessary contribution to nuclear proliferation.

"It signals to ourselves and to the world our intention to retain a huge nuclear arsenal," Mello said.

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Nuke Plant Doubts Voiced

Adam Rankin Journal Staff Writer

Richardson Not Sure N.M. Being Seriously Considered

Gov. Bill Richardson on Tuesday expressed misgivings about government plans to possibly build a \$2 billion to \$4 billion nuclear weapons plant in New Mexico.

His comments come months after all five of the state's congressional delegates joined in a bipartisan message to say they favored siting the plant in Carlsbad.

"I have serious reservations about that project," Richardson said Tuesday at a news conference.

The governor had remained mum on the subject until now.

"I am not even sure we are being seriously considered (for the plant)," Richardson said during a news conference in Santa Fe.

As former secretary of the Department of Energy in the Clinton administration, Richardson may have some inside knowledge on the matter -- at least, that is what some critics of the proposal to build the plant say.

"We're very pleased that the governor thinks this way, but it's not enough," said Greg Mello, director of the Los Alamos Study Group, which opposes the plant. Mello has said the plant would allow the U.S. nuclear arsenal to swell and new designs to be built at a time when such weapons should be dismantled.

"The important decision about the 'Modern Pit Facility' is not where to site it, but whether to build it," Mello said.

The Modern Pit Facility, which could be built at Los Alamos, Carlsbad or one of three other locations elsewhere in the country, would produce plutonium triggers, or pits, to replace the nation's aging nuclear stockpile. The pits set off a larger, second-stage blast in nuclear weapons.

In June, Democrats Sen. Jeff Bingaman and Rep. Tom Udall signed a letter to DOE chief Spencer Abraham endorsing Carlsbad as a potential site for the plant only if the DOE deems the facility necessary. They joined Republicans Sen. Pete Domenici, Rep. Heather Wilson and Rep. Steve Pearce in recommending Carlsbad be given preference over other sites for the project that would bring with it about 1,000 jobs.

Carlsbad officials and local leaders have voiced strong support for hosting the nuclear weapons facility, citing its economic benefits and DOE's good reputation for running Carlsbad's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant.

Richardson spokesman Gilbert Gallegos said the governor, who refrained from endorsing Carlsbad with the congressional delegation, has remained neutral on the issue until now.

"All he's really said on that as of late is that he has serious reservations," Gallegos said.

During the news conference, Richardson said he wants to settle another issue with DOE before dealing with the matter of the pit plant.

Louisiana Energy Services announced in September its intention to build the National Enrichment Facility in Lea County to process uranium so it can be used as fuel in nuclear power plants.

Richardson has expressed concern that waste tailings from the enrichment plant will be left in the state.

"I am very insistent that there be legislative language in the Congress that prohibits the disposal of waste in New Mexico or by the Department of Energy in New Mexico," Richardson said. "I am supportive of the project only if those restrictions are accomplished."

PHOTO: Color

RICHARDSON: "I have serious reservations about that project"

Facility Bothers Governor

Doubts Expressed About Nuke Plant

12/24/03
BY ADAM RANKIN

Journal Northern Bureau

SANTA FE — Gov. Bill Richardson on Tuesday expressed misgivings about government plans to possibly build a \$2 billion to \$4 billion nuclear weapons plant in New Mexico, months after all five of the state's congressional delegates joined in a bipartisan message to say they favored siting the plant in Carlsbad.

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THE YEAR THAT WAS

RISING STARS

These 10 stories of success in Albuquerque show how natural talent and hard work in 2003 laid foundations for big success in 2004

ACTIVISM

Greg Mello

Rising concerns over extensive changes the Bush administration is making in U.S. nuclear weapons policy are raising the star of Greg Mello, head of the Los Alamos Study Group, based in Albuquerque.



Mello

Mello, 53, born in Northern California, co-founded the group in 1989 to pursue "nuclear disarmament in a just and sustainable world." Its focus is the national laboratories, primarily Los Alamos and Sandia in Albuquerque.

Mello, who has written for The Trib's Insight & Opinion section, concedes he is getting more inquiries and national attention lately as a voice balancing the Bush administration on nukes.

Of particular concern to Mello lately are the administration's efforts to develop low-yield "mini-nukes" and other "advanced concepts" in nuclear weapons and to build new nuclear weapons production plants; refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; decision to back out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; and foot dragging on complying with biological and chemical weapons conventions and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Expect to hear more from him as the administration proceeds.