Lab Seals Faulty Container

Plutonium Was Stored in Plastic

4/25/06

By John Arnold
Journal Staff Writer

Workers at Los Alamos National Laboratory have sealed a faulty storage container responsible for an accidental plutonium release last month. But dozens of similarly constructed containers remain in the plutonium facility's vault, according to a representative from an independent safety board.

Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board site representative C.H. Keilers Jr. wrote in a Jan. 6 memorandum that the source of the contamination appears to be a container of plutonium oxide stored at LANL's Technical Area-55.

The highly carcinogenic nuclear material — which dates back to the early 1980s — was packaged in a plastic jar enclosed in a plastic bag, Keilers wrote. Like dozens of similar containers in the vault, the jar and bag sat in a taped, slip-lid can.

"... the inner jar and bag failed, releasing powder into the can; the vinyl tape around the lid circumference then possibly failed, causing the release," the memo states.

Nine workers evacuated the vault after air monitors detected the Dec. 19 release, which a LANL spokesman described as "a minor event." Nasal swipes indicated five workers had been exposed to minute contamination levels that registered far below federal exposure limits.

The release came as LANL works to comply with 1994 and 2000 Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board recommendations to stabilize and safely store nuclear materials at Department of Energy facilities across the country.

The United States stopped manufacturing new nuclear weapons in 1989, and the board stated in its 1994 recommendation that materials left over from weapons production posed hazards if they weren't stabilized and stored properly.

For example, plutonium can interact with and rupture plastic in older storage containers.

In 2000, the board reiterated its concerns, suggesting in a revised recommendation that DOE facilities weren't making adequate progress in implementing stabilization and storage programs.

LANL Nuclear Materials Technology division leader Steve Yarbro said Tuesday that under the revised 2000 recommendation, LANL is ahead of its schedule — possibly by one or two years — to stabilize and repackage nuclear material by 2010. LANL workers have "triple-bagged" last month's faulty container and a similar one, which had been scheduled to be repackaged this month.

"We have a full recovery plan that we're executing," he said. "We meet with (DNFSB representatives) daily on our status and where we're at, and we're moving ahead in a very diligent, methodical fashion."

But lab watchdogs have criticized progress on implementing the board's recommendations, saying LANL has dragged its feet on the issue for more than a decade.

"It was to avoid this kind of accident that the recommendation was made," said Los Alamos Study Group executive director Greg Mello. "The longer plutonium is in contact with plastic, the worse the problem becomes."

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LANL May Begin Building Nuke Pits

Fleet grounded?

Bush's proposed 2007 budget retires F-117A stealth jets **D1**

'Heavy lift'

President's $277 trillion budget could be headache for Congress **A5**

Energy Secretary Says Project a Top Priority

BY JOHN FLECK AND MICHAEL COLEMAN
Journal Staff Writers

WASHINGTON — Federal officials on Monday proposed expanding nuclear weapons manufacturing at Los Alamos National Laboratory, part of a sweeping plan to develop new nuclear weapons for the first time since the end of the Cold War.

By 2012, they hope to be able to make 30 to 40 new plutonium nuclear weapon cores per year, according to the Bush administration's fiscal year 2007 budget request.

The government's top nuclear weapons official cautioned that the new program remains primarily a research effort for now, aimed at finding ways to build safer and more reliable nuclear weapons. But the spending plan delivered to Congress on Monday includes, for the first time, a long-term spending plan for moving the weapons from the drawing board to production.

In a news conference unveiling the administration's proposed spending plan, Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman said the new "Reliable Replacement Warhead" project, as the effort

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LANL May Begin Building Nuke Pits

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is called, was a Bush administration priority.

The Energy Department budget also includes money for a new civilian science initiative promised last week in President Bush's State of the Union speech.

Overall, funding for New Mexico's Energy Department laboratories — Los Alamos and Sandia — is projected to decline 2 percent next year, according to the U.S. Department of Energy's proposed 2007 budget.

That is unlikely to cause any job losses at the labs, Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., said in a telephone news conference.

The biggest news in the budget was not the dollars but how the Department of Energy wants to spend them: to design replacements for aging Cold War nuclear weapons.

The budget request and recent comments by senior officials lay out a longer-term plan that suggests the country could be building new nuclear weapons by 2012. They would be the first since the Cold War ended in 1991.

Under the plan, which must be approved by Congress, Los Alamos will be asked to make plutonium "pits" for the new weapons.

Pits sit in the heart of modern nuclear weapons. They are semi-spherical shells of plutonium that are squeezed by high explosives to start the weapon's chain reaction.

The United States has been unable to make pits since the Rocky Flats plutonium factory near Denver closed in 1989. Los Alamos is preparing to begin making 10 pits per year by 2008 as replacements for pits in existing weapons. The budget unveiled Monday contemplates expanding that to between 30 and 40 pits per year by 2012 for the new weapon.

In a talk two weeks ago, National Nuclear Security Administration chief Linton Brooks called the shift to manufacturing new weapons rather than simply maintaining old ones "transformational."

Greg Mello, an anti-weapons activist with the Albuquerque-based Los Alamos Study Group, called the budget proposal "a radical change."

"The emphasis is shifting from maintaining existing weapons to replacing all of them," Mello said Monday.

In Monday's news conference, Brooks cautioned that the Reliable Replacement Warhead remains a research effort.

"Remember, this is research," he said, "so we don't know whether we can do all the things we hoped we can do." But he added that the plan "has a great deal of possibility for improving the long-term safety, security and reliability of the stockpile."

For the Bush administration's new science initiative, Bodman said the DOE budget contains an extra half-billion dollars for scientific research and development, in accordance with President Bush's call for keeping American technologically competitive in the years ahead.

"This will be a clarion call to the world that America means to retain our position of leadership in research and development and benefit from the economic fallout that we have enjoyed for the past five or six decades," Bodman said.

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Pit program shows progress

Boost in funds for nuclear warhead appartus draws cheers and jeers

By Andy Lenderman The New Mexican

LOS ALAMOS — The goal to build 30 to 40 new plutonium pits, or triggers for nuclear warheads, sends a message that the United States has finally caught up with other world nuclear powers, the boss of the National Nuclear Security Administration said Tuesday.

The pit-manufacturing program is based at Los Alamos National Laboratory, the only place in the country where that work occurs, agency chief Linton Brooks said in an interview.

President Bush's proposed 2007 fiscal-year budget includes more than $147 million for the program, which is an increase, and calls for an eventual boosting of production capacity from 10 pits a year to 30 to 40. Six pits were produced in 2005, according to the president's budget request.

"We're the only nuclear power that can't produce 30 to 40 new pits a year now," Brooks said. "It says through great effort we've taken 30 years to reach the standard China has today."

Brooks was in Los Alamos on Tuesday to visit with agency employees, including the lab director, and attend an awards ceremony for top scientists.

Later, his comments drew criticism from two nuclear-disarmament groups opposed **to the pit-production program. Both Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group and Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch New Mexico said Brooks' position was "ludicrous," arguing the United States already dominates the world in terms of nuclear military power.**

"The U.S. now spends more each year on its military than the whole rest of the world combined," Mello said in a statement. "The U.S. spends more on its nuclear weapons than any other country, and as a result has far more capable nuclear forces than any other."

Brooks also discussed the Reliable Replacement Warhead program, which has been described as a way to refurbish a nuclear weapon based upon basic weapon science that's been proven for decades. Critics say it's a new weapons program that will anger other countries.

Today, Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore national laboratories are in competition to design the replacement warhead.

Brooks said it would have the same military characteristics, the same target and the same delivery system, or missile, to carry it.

"It's component replacement, and the question of how many components do you replace

before you say it's new is a little bit of a philosophic question," Brooks said. " ... There's no reasonable definition of a new weapon that would call this a new weapon. It's going to have a lot of new parts on it."

But Coghlan says it is a new weapon.

"With RRW, Brooks is pushing a 'nukes forever' program that will be a Trojan horse for new designs," Coghlan said by e-mail. "He himself has told Congress that U.S. nuclear weapons may no longer be useful because new and more usable lowyield and earth-penetrating weapons are needed."

Brooks, while discussing pit production, explained where he's coming from. "I start from a prejudice," he said. "I believe that we are very unlikely in my lifetime to see the political conditions that will lead to the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. ... We are operating on the view that we are going to maintain the deterrent forever, and I think that's what all of the acknowledged and unacknowledged nuclear powers are doing too."

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Tuesday, March 7, 2006

Anti-Nuclear Group Gaining Support

By John Arnold
Journal Staff Writer

The call for nuclear disarmament is growing, an anti-nuclear group said Monday as it marked a milestone in its 18-month campaign to enlist the support of community groups, businesses and individuals.

More than 100 nonprofit organizations in New Mexico have signed the Los Alamos Study Group's "Call for Disarmament," said Greg Mello, the Albuquerque-based group's executive director.

Los Alamos Study Group's campaign coincides with a national debate over whether the United States is abandoning commitments it made under the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, part of which calls on signees to work toward nuclear disarmament.

At a news conference in Santa Fe on Monday, Mello said the United States' recent nuclear pact with India and its plans to build replacement warheads for existing nuclear weapons undermine international nonproliferation efforts.

"Both of these are body blows to the world's nonproliferation regime," Mello said.

In several recent public appearances, National Nuclear Security Administration chief Linton Brooks has described his agency's plans for the country's nuclear policy, which includes a prominent role for Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Brooks says the United States has made "remarkable progress" in reducing the number of nuclear weapons and will continue to do so. But he says the end of the Cold War did not diminish the importance of nuclear weapons in the face of new kinds of threats.

"The United States will, for the foreseeable future, need to retain both nuclear forces and the capabilities to sustain and modernize those forces," Brooks said during a visit to the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tenn., last week. "I do not see any chance of the political conditions for abolition arising in my lifetime, nor do I think abolition could be verified if it were negotiated."

Under NNSA's plans, Los Alamos National Laboratory would play a key role in a program to replace aging nuclear weapons with more reliable bombs. NNSA wants LANL to manufacture 30 to 40 plutonium bomb cores, known as pits, by 2012 for the Reliable Replacement Warhead program.

The government has not manufactured pits since the Rocky Flats plutonium factory near Denver closed in 1989.

The Los Alamos Study Group's disarmament campaign demands that the government not manufacture any more pits, that the United States fulfill its obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and that nuclear dumps at Los Alamos National Laboratory be closed.

In addition to the list of nonprofit organizations, 286 New Mexico businesses, 80

national and international organizations and 2,500 individuals have endorsed Los Alamos Study Group's "Call for Disarmament," Mello said.

"I guess what it does is give shape to our sense that in the community there's a lot of opposition to nuclear weapons and the agenda of the lab," Mello said of the campaign.

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Posted on Sat, Mar. 18, 2006

Amount of unpaid federal fines up sharply

MARTHA MENDOZA and CHRISTOPHER SULLIVAN
Associated Press

When a gasoline spill and fiery explosion killed three young people in Washington state, officials announced a record penalty against a gas pipeline company: $3 million to send the message that such tragedies "must never happen again."

When nuclear labs around the country were found exposing workers to radiation and breaking other safety rules, assessments totaling $2.5 million were quickly ordered.

When coal firms' violations were blamed for deaths, injuries and risks to miners from Alabama to West Virginia, they were slapped with more than $1.3 million in penalties.

What happened next with these no-nonsense enforcement efforts? Not much. The pipeline tab was eventually reduced by 92 percent, the labs' assessments were waived as soon as they were issued, and the mine penalties largely went unpaid.

The amount of unpaid federal fines has risen sharply in the last decade. Individuals and corporations regularly avoid large, highly publicized penalties for wrongdoing - sometimes through negotiations, sometimes because companies go bankrupt, sometimes due to officials' failure to keep close track of who owes what under a decentralized collection system.

These are conclusions of an Associated Press examination of federal financial penalty enforcement across the nation, which also found:

_The government is currently owed more than $35 billion in fines and other payments from criminals and in civil cases, according to Justice Department figures. This is almost five times the amount uncollected 10 years ago - and enough to cover the annual budget of the Department of Homeland Security. A decade ago, Congress mandated that fines be imposed regardless of defendants' ability to pay, which has added tremendously to outstanding debt.

_In 2004, federal authorities ordered $7.8 billion in 98,985 fines, penalties and restitution demands in criminal and civil cases, but collected less than half of that.

_White-collar crime cases account for the largest amount of uncollected debt. In a study, Government Accountability Office investigators found that just 7 percent of restitution in such cases is paid.

"Fines and orders to pay restitution are an important part of how we punish convicted criminals. When so little effort is made to collect that money, we allow convicted criminals to avoid punishment for their crimes, weaken our criminal justice system and ultimately deny justice to the victims of crimes," said Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., who has pressed for closer scrutiny for years.

The mechanisms of financial penalty enforcement are complex. To glimpse them, the AP filed Freedom of Information Act requests with a dozen federal agencies, seeking records on why and how they issue and collect administrative penalties and other assessments.

The AP reviewed the responses, which ranged across the spectrum of regulation - from penalties for an Illinois company's shoddy bike handlebars that resulted in knocked-out teeth to fines for selling tainted meat in Tennessee. The AP also reviewed more than a decade of congressional and Justice Department reports on uncollected debt, and interviewed agency officials, prosecutors and individuals who were fined.

Although the government does collect billions each year in fines, penalties and restitution - including hundreds of millions in long-outstanding debt - success rates vary from agency to agency, region to region, case to case.

In many high-profile cases, fines are touted by authorities as proof that they are cracking down. Yet frequently those orders are quietly negotiated to just a fraction of their original amounts - as if drivers, faced with fines for speeding, offered the traffic court judge pennies on the dollar, and the judge agreed.

Documents provided to the AP by the Labor Department's Employment Benefits Security Administration, whose job is to protect pension and welfare benefits, showed that $2,000 was the maximum amount paid on nearly a dozen penalties ranging from $86,500 to $180,000; these were for various kinds of violations, everything from failure to file reports to self-dealing by pension fund managers.

Why the reductions? Officials explained that compliance is the agency's goal, and that the law allows penalties to be reduced when companies make amends. Violators who don't comply risk being referred to the Treasury Department,

which can collect by seizing federal benefits.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration's written policy explains to inspectors that they can reduce penalties by as much as 95 percent, "depending upon the employer's `good faith,' (25 percent) `size of business,' (60 percent) and `history of previous violations.' (10 percent)"

Internal documents from U.S. Customs show that dramatically large fines may be cut sharply.

Agency documents released under AP's FOIA request listed, for example, a $60,911,316 "commercial fraud" assessment for one company - but the case ended with a $15,000 collection by Customs.

The company, Richemont North America, contradicted the Customs reports, saying the case never reached the point of an actual, multimillion dollar fine.

Admittedly, some paperwork was not in order, company lawyer Alan Grieve said, but he added: "Ultimately, the size of the settlement does reflect the fact that Richemont had no major problem at all."

The Energy Department routinely issues substantial fines it isn't even allowed to collect.

Federal law exempts the national nuclear laboratories from most financial liability, but the Energy Department has issued some $2.5 million in fines against Los Alamos, Livermore and Argonne national laboratories since 2000. The fines - issued and waived in the same sentence - involved 31 different workers who inhaled or touched radioactive or toxic materials.

In 2004, Energy's National Nuclear Safety Department fined Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico $770,000 for five separate violations after two workers were exposed to dangerously high levels of plutonium. The violation notices add in parentheses: "Waived by Statute."

"This is kind of an exercise in absurdity," said Greg Mello, who heads the Los Alamos Study Group, a nuclear disarmament activist organization in Albuquerque.

Even so, the Energy Department includes the fines in its annual reports to Congress and often announces them in press releases.

Last year, Congress tightened the rules so that as nuclear laboratory contracts are renewed, the fine waivers are eliminated. Eventually, said DOE spokesman Jeff Sherwood, nuclear labs will have to pay imposed fines.

The reason DOE issued fines it could not collect was to show what the problems were and how bad, he said: "A $1 million fine says something different than a $10,000 fine."

Financial penalties are regularly touted by agencies and prosecutors as a strict consequence of lawbreaking. The message - that violators can expect to pay dearly - can be misleading.

The Office of Pipeline Safety, a Transportation Department bureau, is one of a number of agencies chastised by members of Congress for failing to follow through on enforcement.

Nearly seven years ago, a pipeline ruptured, spilling 230,000 gallons of gasoline into a creek near Bellingham, Wash. The fuel exploded into a fireball that ravaged the surrounding woods. And it killed two 10-year-old boys playing in the woods and a young man, 18, who had gone to the stream to fish.

Authorities vowed to punish those at fault, and indeed some company officials eventually served prison time.

But on June 2, 2000, the Transportation Department issued a forceful press release, announcing a $3.05 million administrative penalty against the pipeline owner, Olympic Pipe Line Co. This, it said, was the largest in the history of the federal pipeline safety program.

"Tragic events like this pipeline failure must never happen again," then-Transportation Secretary Rodney E. Slater said at the time. "This civil penalty is one of a series of actions we have and are taking to help protect the people and environment."

But last year, with the memorials in place, fish returning to the creek and the forest budding with new growth, the penalty was quietly reduced to $250,000.

"They let them off with a slap," said Carl Weiner, who heads the Bellingham-based Pipeline Safety Trust.

Olympic Pipe Line officials disagree, saying they already paid $11 million in state and Justice Department assessments and $15 million in restoration and improvements.

Still, the case illustrates how the value of assessed penalties is merely a starting point for some officials.

The Environmental Protection Agency, for example, is often willing to reduce penalties in exchange for polluters agreeing to spend money cleaning up.

"We trade off a portion of the penalty in return for them doing supplemental environmental projects," said the EPA's Tom Skinner.

The recent West Virginia coal mine deaths focused new criticism on enforcement tradeoffs made by mine safety inspectors.

During hearings in January, Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., voiced outrage at how coal operators can whittle down fines. He cited assessments by the Mine Safety and Health Administration against a company in an Alabama mine where 13 people were killed in 2001.

"Incredibly, ... an Administrative Law Judge reduced these fines from $435,000 to a mere $3,000 - a decision that harms workers and erodes MSHA's authority," Specter and three fellow senators elaborated in a letter to Labor Secretary Elaine Chao.

The Labor Department later announced plans to raise fine amounts, and in a case it called "precedent-setting" sought an injunction against a Kentucky mine operator and two companies he owns, which paid nothing on $200,000 in penalties.

AP's Freedom of Information filing turned up numerous cases in which administrative penalties were ordered against mining companies for dangerous laxness in following rules - and yet records showed many went unpaid. Sometimes, in the narrow-margin world of small coal companies, the violator escaped paying by declaring bankruptcy or ceasing operations.

On Feb. 20, 2002, near Rupert, W.Va., a section of mine roof up to 10 feet thick collapsed, killing one miner and seriously injuring another. It took more than four hours to dig them out.

The MSHA investigators' report concluded: "Root cause - Mine management condoned unsafe work practices and ... demonstrated a reckless disregard of the dangers posed by conditions created when faulty pillar recovery methods were used." Some supervisors were eventually ordered jailed and fined, prosecutors said; two companies that ran the mine were placed on a year's probation.

The companies also were hit with $165,000 in administrative penalties each. But MSHA has no record of any payment four years later. When contacted by AP about why, the agency cited records showing the mine was sealed and, in one case, a bankruptcy filing made.

"They probably figured it wasn't worth it financially to stay in business," said the agency's Allen K. Watson.

When agencies can't get debtors to pay, the Justice Department may get the task of collecting a fine or penalty. But the process is decentralized. The collection legwork falls to the 93 U.S. Attorney offices around the country, where "financial litigation units" have the task of pursuing the money.

Although the backlog of uncollected debt has drastically increased, from $6 billion in 1995 to more than $35 billion in 2004, the number of financial litigation unit lawyers has remained steady, usually just one or two per office, supplemented by paralegals.

Reviewing the adequacy of staffing was one of 14 recommendations made by the GAO in 2001 to improve collection. A followup report two years ago noted progress in streamlining procedures but still said "fragmented processes and lack of coordination" remained.

Until these problems are fully addressed, GAO said then, "the effectiveness of criminal fines and restitution as a punitive tool may be diminished."

An attempt by the prosecutors and court system to create a National Fine Center, centrally coordinating collections across myriad jurisdictions, collapsed and was abandoned a decade ago.

The Justice Department office overseeing U.S. attorneys said it has made strides toward better coordination, including links with Treasury's program to offset certain federal benefits to repay debt. Justice also published a "Prosecutors Guide to Criminal Monetary Penalties."

A major factor in the high rate of uncollected fines and penalties was a change in the law.

The 1996 Victims Mandatory Restitution Act requires judges to order payments regardless of a defendant's ability to pay. It's no coincidence, says Natalie Collins, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Attorney's office in Las Vegas, Nev., that the uncollected debts have steeply increased since the law was passed.

"These people come out of prison with a huge restitution debt and if they can't pay, they have that judgment just hanging over them," she said. "We can't squeeze blood out of a turnip."

That said, some prosecutors' offices are more successful than others in going after the money.

For example, in 2003, Delaware's U.S. Attorney's office was the top collector in the country, bringing in $365 million in criminal and civil debt and leaving just $19 million outstanding.

At the other end of the spectrum that year was the Montgomery, Ala., office, which collected $914,676 and ended 2003 with almost $30 million uncollected.

Steve Doyle, an assistant U.S. Attorney in Montgomery, said the small office has just one attorney and one paralegal, assigned part-time to collecting debts - which are often uncollectable.

"Other than in white-collar cases, most criminal defendants don't have any money," said Doyle. "We attempt to collect everything that can be collected."

Sometimes even as financial penalties are being ordered, it's obvious that the money is never going to be paid.

"I've had clients who have had millions of dollars of restitution imposed, and every one in the courtroom knows that this person will never be able to pay," said Mike Filipovich, a federal public defender in Seattle.

Five years ago, Filipovich represented Leonard Fridall Terry Antoine, a member of Canada's Cowichan band of the Salish tribe, who was sentenced to two years in prison and ordered to pay $147,000 for paying people to shoot bald eagles and selling their parts. Prosecutors charged him $3,000 for each of 49 eagles.

"It is absolutely right that this defendant serve time for such an outright violation of our nation's environmental laws," said Tom Sansonetti, then-Assistant Attorney General of the Department of Justice's Environmental and Natural Resources Division. "The outcome will serve as a deterrent." Antoine was released from prison in 2003, but has not paid any of the fines, according to federal records.

"The reality for most folks," said Filipovich, "is that they simply can't afford to pay."

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Saturday, April 8, 2006

LANL Needs Skilled Workers

By John Arnold
Journal Staff Writer

Los Alamos National Laboratory needs more skilled technicians to help with its expanding pit manufacturing program and other jobs, and the state's community colleges can help, a LANL consultant said Friday.

"Manufacturing has not really been a major part of the lab, but it will become a major part of the lab," said the consultant, Abad Sandoval. "So we've got a lot of people working, or will be working, in manufacturing who really need to become certified and retrained."

About 40 representatives from most of the state's 18 community colleges and university branch campuses will attend a work force training forum at Santa Fe Community College Monday to hear more about work force needs at LANL, Sandia National Laboratories, PNM and Intel.

Two items on the agenda list LANL pit manufacturing as topics, although a spokesman from the lab's public affairs office said the agenda is misleading.

While the LANL officials scheduled to speak at the forum work in the lab's pit manufacturing program, they won't be talking about it, according to lab spokesman Kevin Roark.

"All they're going to talk about is the kinds of skills that are needed at a place like Los Alamos," he said. "... this is just a meeting of the minds to let these officials at the community colleges know what the general overall needs are, with the hope that what comes out of it is the development of programs and curricula that helps meet those needs."

Pits are the grapefruit-size plutonium cores of nuclear bombs. LANL is playing a key role in the U.S. Department of Energy's plans to overhaul the country's nuclear weapons program, under which Los Alamos will serve as an interim pit manufacturing facility until a permanent one can be built.

According to the DOE's plan, outlined Wednesday by National Nuclear Security Administration deputy administrator Thomas D'Agostino, LANL would manufacture between 30 and 50 pits per year beginning in 2012, before the yet-to-be-determined permanent site comes on line. A more modest pit production operation— capable of producing 10 pits per year— will be ready to go next year, according to D'Agostino.

Frank Renz, executive director of the New Mexico Association of Community Colleges, said an aging work force was a big driving force behind Monday's forum. Renz— who, along with LANL consultant Sandoval, helped organize the forum— expects to learn more about the expansion of LANL's pit production program and the skills the lab will require from workers.

"That's definitely part of the program (Monday)," he said. "The community college representatives who are coming are going to hear more about those requirements so that they can gear up, if they're not already geared up, to producing more skilled workers to help with the ramp up (in pit production)."

LANL isn't the only institution in need of skilled technicians who support scientists and engineers. Machinists, welders, electrical and chemical maintenance workers and similarly skilled workers— especially those with math and science skills— are in high demand, Sandoval said.

The community colleges can play a role in training such workers and provide a needed boost to the state's economy, he said.

The lab has often reached out to the state's community colleges, offering resources for programs that train machinists, informational technology workers and others, said Sheila Ortego, Santa Fe Community College's executive vice president.

Ortego said LANL and Sandia may be interested in providing support for technician training programs, but those programs wouldn't just benefit the labs.

"This would be the kind of general technician training that could be applied to many industries, if we can get it off the ground," she said. "... and so if they can assist us then everyone benefits, including other industries not even associated with the lab."

But anti-nuclear activists say jobs in pit production are not only dangerous, they run contrary to the country's international nonproliferation obligations. Training dollars would be better directed to fields like health care, education and renewable resources, said Greg Mello, executive director of the Los Alamos Study Group.

"As long as we keep spending hundreds of billions on the military, and corrupting our educational and training institutions to serve the military, we won't be building the job opportunities we really need," he said.

Bomb making is controversial, Sandoval acknowledged, but the lab is a key contributor to northern New Mexico's economy.

"Everyone to his or her own opinion," he said. "These are good jobs."

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FREE NewMexican

LANL program gets help from Senate committee

print

By ANDY LENDERMAN | The New Mexican
June 30, 2006

A new chemistry building and environmental cleanup programs at Los Alamos National Laboratory got big boosts Thursday from the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Big Picture

U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., included in a bill $112.4 million for the lab's new Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Facility, "a state-of-the-art nuclear laboratory" that Domenici has called the largest building project ever undertaken by the Department of Energy.

He also boosted environmental-cleanup programs at Los Alamos for $141 million, a $50 million increase over President Bush's budget request.

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LANL- The 'Real' Story

The Energy and Water Development Appropriations Bill for the 2007 fiscal year must be approved by the full Senate before moving to the House of Representatives, which has been more conservative on lab funding in recent years. It passed the Senate Appropriations Committee on Thursday.

The $30.7 billion measure would fund the Department of Energy, the Army Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation.

Domenici said the new building "will play an important role for the complex today, as well as the complex of the future."

Domenici broke ground on the project in January.

"Without what goes on in this building, the existing (nuclear-weapons) stockpile cannot be certified, and the state of the stockpile cannot be verified," Domenici said then.

However, a House subcommittee has criticized planning around the project as "irrational."

That's because the department has proposed building a so-called Consolidated

Plutonium Production Center, at a yet undetermined location, by 2022, according to language from the House version of the energy and water-projects bill.

The total cost of the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Facility is estimated at nearly $1 billion, the House Energy and Water Development Appropriations Subcommittee reported.

The new building at Los Alamos, which would store special nuclear material, according to the bill, will have its "primary production support function" made obsolete by the planned Consolidated Plutonium Production Center.

"The committee finds this type of planning by the (National Nuclear Security Administration) irrational," the House bill reads.

Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, a citizen watchdog group, is opposed to the new building.

"In our view, having that facility built ... makes it much more likely that Los Alamos will end up being the country's permanent site for expanded plutonium pit production," Coghlan said.

A pit is a trigger for a nuclear weapon.

The NNSA has proposed to increase annual pit production at Los Alamos from 20 per year to up to 50 certified pits per year, according to a draft environmental-impact statement released by the agency.

Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group, which opposes nuclear weapons, said the new building at Los Alamos is "a new pit factory for the United States aimed at jump-starting nuclear-weapons production."

However, Mello and Domenici appear to have found some common ground on the extra money for environmental cleanup.

Domenici said the department proposed a deep cut in cleanup funding, which he restored.

"I believe this scenario had the potential to backfire on DOE and increase costs by extending the cost of cleanup and fines," Domenici said.

The department is committed to cleanup at Los Alamos through a mutual consent order with the state of New Mexico.

Domenici also said his bill specifies the department must pay any fines if it fails to follow the consent order. The state could charge between $8 million and $35 million in penalties, according to language from Domenici's bill.

"There are many worse places in the DOE where you could spend that

$50 million," Mello said. "It's a good thing, given the context."

The lab recently reported there are a total of 2,129 contaminated sites there. Of those, 1,365 have been cleaned up and 764 remain, according to the lab. The cost to complete the cleanup is estimated to be more than $1 billion.

Examples of contaminated sites include dumps, landfills, firing sites and

container-storage areas.

The secretary of the New Mexico Environment Department has urged Domenici and U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., to stop the cuts in cleanup funding proposed by the department.

"This cleanup is crucial to protect the health and environment of New Mexicans for generations to come," Secretary Ron Curry wrote to Domenici and Bingaman earlier this year. " ... I urge you to do what you can to secure the necessary funding to avoid needless penalties and protect our citizenry."

Close | Print

LANL May Up Its Nuclear Production

Critics Protest Government Plans

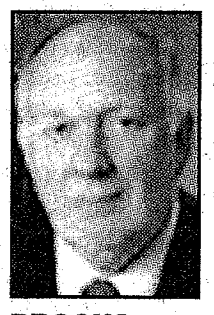
By John Arnold 8/9/06
Journal Staff Writer

LOS ALAMOS — Opponents of the National Nuclear Security Administration's plans to build more nuclear bomb cores at Los Alamos National Laboratory lined up Tuesday to blast the idea.

NNSA held the first of three public meetings to gather comments on a draft environmental evaluation, known as a sitewide environmental impact statement.

The voluminous document outlines potential environmental impacts from lab operations over the next five years. The evaluation covers a wide range of nuclear and non-nuclear operations, but the most controversial includes NNSA's plan to ramp up the production of nuclear bomb triggers, known as pits.

Critics on Tuesday said the proposal undermines international nonproliferation efforts, and they questioned how the lab would handle increased waste.



BROOKS: NNSA chief has final say on nuclear alternatives

"Currently, we don't have adequate and safe plans to dispose of waste we have already produced," Albuquerque pastor Daniel Erdman said.

Currently, the lab is cleared to manufacture up to 20 pits a year. NNSA wants to increase production to 50 certified pits a year.

Because not all manufactured pits meet certification requirements, NNSA is requesting that LANL be allowed to make up to 80 a year, according to the environmental evaluation.

The plan will "dramatically change the nature of Los Alamos National Laboratory's mission," according to Greg Mello of the Albuquerque-based Los Alamos Study Group. "Science at Los Alamos is an endangered species."

NNSA officials said they will incorporate public comments into a final version of the environmental impact statement, which will be sent to agency chief Linton Brooks for review.

The final document will offer several alternatives for how LANL should operate in the future. NNSA is recommending expanded operation including pit production. But the environmental evaluation will also include a "no-action" alternative and one for reduced operations.

Brooks will make a final decision on which alternatives the lab will pursue.

Speakers on Tuesday criticized the process as rushed, and they said the public's views should weigh heavily in the decision.

"It's not Linton Brooks, but the people of this country who should be making this decision," said Astrid Webster of Albuquerque.

Critics said the proposal undermines international nonproliferation efforts, and they questioned how the lab would handle increased waste.

Two more public meetings are scheduled for this week, including one tonight at Northern New Mexico College in Española. Another meeting is scheduled for Thursday at Santa Fe Community College. Both meetings start at 6 p.m.

NNSA officials will also be collecting written comments through Sept. 20.

Public can weigh in on lab's future

By Andy Lenderman
The New Mexican

New buildings, environmental cleanup and more plutonium-pit production for nuclear weapons are possibilities for Los Alamos National Laboratory in the near future

The National Nuclear Security Administration, which oversees the nuclear weapons lab and is responsible for the country's nuclear weapons stockpile, is holding meetings and gathering comments on these and other ideas included in a draft environmental impact statement for the lab.

There's a public meeting tonight in Española and one Thursday in Santa Fe where citizens can log their comments.

Pit production has caught the attention of the nuclear watchdog community. Pits are triggers for nuclear warheads.

In the impact statement, under what's called the preferred alternative, the lab could go from making up to 20 pits per year to 80. Of those, 50 would be certified for use in the weapons stockpile.

"We do have an interim pit production mission here at the lab," NNSA spokesman Bernie Pleau said. "... But it's nowhere near the capacity of Rocky

See **FUTURE,** Page C-5

IF YOU GO

Two public meetings include:

◆ 6-8:30 p.m. tonight in Española at Northern New Mexico Community College, Eagle Memorial Sportsplex, 921 Paseo de Oñate.

◆ 6-8:30 p.m. Thursday in Santa Fe at Santa Fe Community College, Main Building, Jemez Rooms, 6401 Richards Ave.

Written comments should be sent to Elizabeth Withers at lanl_sweis@doeal.gov, or NNSA Los Alamos Site Office, 528 35th St., Los Alamos, NM, 87544-2201. They can also be faxed to (505) 667-5948.

To place comments by phone, call (877) 491-4957, a toll free number.

part II, Wed. Aug. 9th

Future: LANL waste could increase

Continued from Page C-1

(Flats). And it's never going to get to that capacity that we can see right now. And it's based on the needs of the stockpile."

Pits were produced at the Department of Energy's Rocky Flats weapons complex during the Cold War. Nuclear-watchdog groups in New Mexico are concerned that environmental contamination could accompany a potential increase in pit production here.

"Los Alamos lab is the largest institution in Northern New Mexico," Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group said. "... And the character of the laboratory is going to change under these plans. And the laboratory will become a manufacturing center for a new generation of nuclear weapons."

Everything from the region's identity to property values could be affected, Mello said. "We can be assured that accidents will happen," he said. "We just don't know how severe they'll be."

Also in the draft statement, the amount of transuranic nuclear waste generated at Los Alamos could rise to 510 cubic yards a year from 260 cubic yards a year.

Much of that new waste will be collected during environmental cleanup, said Elizabeth Withers, an NNSA official. Specifically, she said, the waste could come from three areas, including the potential for more pit production.

The other two areas include:

◆ Replacing old buildings with new ones, which depends on Congressional funding. There are proposals to replace a radioactive liquid-waste-treatment facility; build a new science complex; remodel the plutonium facility and replace a warehouse and truck-inspection station, among other projects, Withers said.

"Most of the building up here took place in the '50s," Withers said.

◆ Cleaning up 12 major waste disposal areas.

Ultimately, NASA Administrator Linton Brooks will determine the lab's direction, and he can pick and choose among the various options in the impact statement, Withers said.

Contact Andy Lenderman at 995-3827 or alenderman@sfnewmexican.

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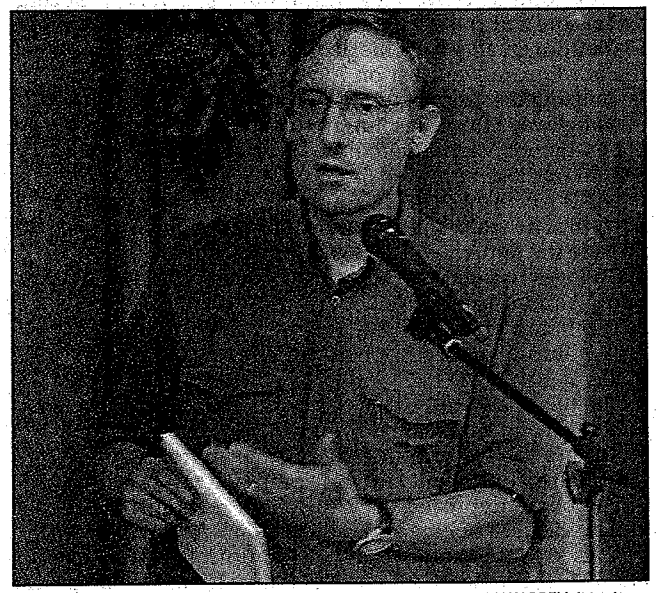

GARY WARREN/Monitor

EXPERT Greg Mello, executive director of the Los Alamos Study Group, speaks of the changing direction of work at Los Alamos National Laboratory during a Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement public hearing at Fuller Lodge on Tuesday evening.

Lab folks mum on pit production

ROGER SNODGRASS
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Monitor Assistant Editor

It was 18-0 Tuesday night, as the first of at least three public meetings about the relative environmental impacts of various development scenarios at Los Alamos National Laboratory came to a lopsided end.

The subject was the Draft Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement for Continued Operations. The first opportunity for public comment took place in Los Alamos, but no current laboratory employees offered comment one way or the other.

Other venues including written comments are available.

Opposition to the National Nuclear Security Administration's "expanded operations alternative," - and particularly the expansion of nuclear weapon activities and additional waste production - dominated the two-hour environmental impact "slam" at Fuller Lodge.

Elizabeth Winters, the Department of Energy compliance officer for the National Environmental Program Act at Los Alamos, introduced the four-volume document, asking for public input on the statement so that "the best possible decision" could be made.

She said the comment period had just been extended an extra 15 days, from Sept. 5 to Sept. 20, a decision that was made Tuesday.

Several speakers, including Erich Kuerschner of Taos, complained that copies of the draft document were not readily available. Chris Mechels of Tesuque objected to the lack of availability of supporting assessments cited in the draft document.

Many speakers were from neighboring communities; some came from out of state. Their commentaries ranged from moral thrashing to substantive critiques about the public review process and scientific issues at stake in the three main baskets of proposals for the next five years at the laboratory - no action, reduced activities and expanded activities.

Topping the publicly expressed concerns was the rapid expansion of pit production. Pits are the plutonium primaries that initiate a thermonuclear explosion and LANL is the only place in the country where a few handfuls are still being made. The expansion plan calls for quadrupling production plans from about 20 to about 80 pits.

Greg Mello, executive director of the Los Alamos Study Group, said that a decision to quadruple the pit production would dramatically change the laboratory, and he didn't think people in Los Alamos yet realized what that would mean.

Jodi Benson of Los Alamos, among others, made the

See **SESSION**, *2*

SESSION Pit production discussed

From Page 1

implication explicit.

"This is going to specifically change the direction of Los Alamos, moving it from science to production," she said, sharing a view she had heard expressed in the community.

In the past, LANL officials have expressed little interest in assuming a major pit production role at the weapons laboratory.

A handful of speakers from Los Alamos, such as Ed Grothus, were either retired or not directly employed by the laboratory.

Chuck Pergler, an environmental consultant for a company with laboratory contracts, said new pit production might not even be necessary and that studies about pit longevity in the existing weapons stockpile should be studied, "before we spend a billion dollars" on this kind of expansion.

He was one of several speakers who objected to removing the discussion of where to locate the Modern Pit Facility from the national agenda, and making it into a local issue, despite having important environmental consequences for many other communities around the country.

In an overview of the NEPA process, Withers explained that NNSA Administrator Linton Brooks would make the final decisions about the level of operations at Los Alamos and which actions would be taken.

Several decisions, formalized as Records of Decision, are expected, as a result of the NEPA process.

Withers said she anticipated that one decision would be an affirmation of a commitment to meet the court-ordered compliance agreement with the state, concerning the ongoing comprehensive environmental clean-up program at the laboratory.

She compared the decision-making process to voting, noting that Brooks could choose one or another of the alternatives, like voting "a straight party ticket" or he could pick individual actions from one alternative to go with parts of another, as in voting across party lines.

Other new projects that would add new or expand existing capabilities include several new buildings and building complexes - the four-building, 700,000-square-foot Center for Weapons Research to consolidate the stockpile stewardship program in the main administrative area; the 400,000-square-foot science complex; and the 10-building, 400,000-square-foot Radiological Sciences Institute, a replacement for the 57-year-old radiography facility at Technical Area 8.

Expanded computer operations at the Metropolis Center for Modeling and Simulation would contribute to an overall 40-percent increase in electrical requirement to 668,000 megawatt-hours and an additional one-third water usage, to 522 million gallons.

The Radioactive Liquid Waste Treatment Facility would be modernized to manage the disposition of about 66 percent more transuranic waste and 25 percent more low-level radioactive waste under an expanded operation option.

A "reduced operations alternative" includes 20-percent reductions in high explosive processing and testing, and shutting down the Los Alamos Neutron Science Center (LANSCE), maintaining the system for a possible future restart.

Regina Wheeler, Solid Waste Division manager for Los Alamos County said the county is reviewing the document and would be submitting written comments.

The public comment meetings continue tonight in Eagles Memorial Sportsplex at Northern New Mexico Community College in Española and in the Main Building at Santa Fe Community College in Santa Fe. Both meetings will begin with a poster session beginning at 6 p.m., NNSA presentations at 6:30 p.m.; and public comment beginning at 6:45 p.m.

More information: E-mail: LANL_SWEIS@DOEAL.GOV or call LASO EIS hotline at (toll free) 1-877-491-4957.

MEETING

From Page 1

said. "I would prefer we maintain ownership and continue to lease it to UNM-LA."

During the board's regular meeting held in the district boardroom Tuesday, the board also voted 5-0 to review the district's vision and mission statements.

"The administrative team will lay out a plan for revitalizing the vision and mission statements," Janecky said. "Brenda Clark from Quality New Mexico will conduct a workshop for the administrative team on Aug. 23 when they will look at revitalizing the vision and mission statements."

A Highway Funds Resolution to resurface the parking lots at Los Alamos Middle School and Barranca Mesa Elementary School was also approved 5-0.

LAPD will provide $8,116 of the $32,467 project cost or 25 percent. The state, through a matching funds program, will provide the remaining $24,359 or 75 percent.

Changes to policies 3545-transportation and 4081-parent participation also received board approval.

The board discussed the pros and cons of random drug testing during extra curricular activities. A decision was not made.

The board also discussed the fact that enrollment at both Mountain and Aspen are down from last year.

Aspen's current enrollment is 267, down from 325 last fall. Mountain's enrollment is at 424 compared to 441 last spring.

The board approved back-to-school meetings and dates and ratification of June and July cash disbursements.

Janecky introduced new LAPS Comptroller Sean Trujillo and LAMS new assistant principal Mike Johnson who previously taught history at LAMS.

The next school board meeting and work session will be held Aug. 24 in the district boardroom. The public is invited to attend.

Critics dominate environmental meetings

8-11-06

ROGER SNODGRASS
roger@lamonitor.com
Monitor Assistant Editor

SANTA FE – The public meetings on future environmental impacts at Los Alamos National Laboratory ended as they began – with even more criticism of expanding nuclear weapons production and hazardous waste generation.

Local officials of the National Nuclear Security Administration again faced a barrage of anger and recrimination Thursday night, in which members of the public repeated many of the same themes from the first meeting in Los Alamos on Tuesday.

"We are following a process that is set down by policy," Bernie Pleau, NNSA spokesman, said this morning. "NEPA is a requirement of the law. We asked people to come in and give their comments. That's what they did. They expressed their opinions and emotions," he said. "We'll look at what was said and what was recorded and incorporate into the document those comments that add value."

So many people were signed up to speak against the Draft Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement Thursday night at Santa Fe Community College that the meeting facilitators limited speaking time to three minutes, rather than the five minutes given to people at the other venues.

This became a point of contention, as many of the speakers complained that they were prepared to speak for five minutes, as others had done during the hearings.

"I was surprised that not one single person stood up to defend pit production, or even the existence of US nuclear deterrent – and NNSA did not presume to defend it either," said Greg Mello this morning, after attending all three nights, including the public meeting in Española on Wednesday. Mello is the executive director of the Los Alamos Study Group who has tracked the laboratory's processes for nearly two decades.

"At the Modern Pit Facility hearings, NNSA officials did attempt to justify the mission and need," Mello continued. "Here, no one stood up to defend the program."

He said only the lab's scientists were spoken of favorably, mostly by people who thought they should be employed more constructively.

A few members of the audience began to act out during the first 15 minutes of the meeting when the project's document manager Elizabeth Winters first mentioned the possibility of increased production of nuclear pits. Others used the meeting as a forum for political recruiting.

Since closure of the Department of Energy's Rocky Flats facility in 1989, production of plutonium triggers for nuclear weapons has shifted to LANL, where an emergency capability has been established.

That role could expand dramatically, if the expanded operations alternative calling for an annual production rate of up to 80 pits is chosen by NNSA Administrator Linton Brooks.

The no-action alternative would continue the current ceiling of 20 pits

See **MEETING**, *3*

GARY WARREN/Monitor

IN ATTENDANCE The third public meeting on the Draft Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement for Continued Operations at LANL was held Thursday evening in Santa Fe. Photos are from a meeting Tuesday evening at Fuller Lodge in which Elizabeth Winters, DOE compliance officer for the National Environmental Program Act at Los Alamos, is seen speaking to attendees. Ed Wilmot, Los Alamos Site Office manager for NNSA, is shown as he listens.

From Page 1

per year, approved in a 1999 decision.

Santa Fe City Councilor Matthew Ortiz led off the meeting by reading a resolution co-sponsored by all but one of the members of the nine-person city council, objecting to the proposed expanded nuclear weapons activities alternatives in the draft document.

The resolution, expected to pass at the governing body's meeting at the end of the month, called for an extension of the comment period, as did many individuals during the course of the evening.

Responding to earlier complaints that references cited in the Draft SWEIS were not available at public locations, NNSA issued a paper listing three locations where they can be obtained – at the Northern New Mexico Citizens Advisory Board office in Santa Fe; at the Government Information Department of Zimmerman Library, UNM, in Albuquerque; and at the LANL Public Reading Room in Los Alamos.

Jay Coghlan of Nuke-Watch New Mexico said his organization would put nine CDs of the referenced information on its website (http://www.nukewatch.org) next week, to make it more accessible.

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In Brief

8/17/06 Tribune

Nuclear bomb work triggers opposition

LOS ALAMOS — A proposal by the federal government for Los Alamos National Laboratory to quadruple its production of triggers for nuclear weapons has met opposition from watchdog groups.

The National Nuclear Security Administration, which oversees the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile, proposes Los Alamos increase its production of plutonium pits from 20 a year to 80.

"We can be assured that accidents will happen," said Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group. "We just don't know how severe they'll be."

He said the proposal will change the character of the laboratory, making it "a manufacturing center for a new generation of nuclear weapons" that could affect everything from the identity of northern New Mexico to property values.

Sunday, September 3, 2006

Nukes Bring Everyone Down

By Willem Malten

The Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement for the new mission at Los Alamos National Laboratory, which will effectively transform the lab into a nuclear bomb factory, talks about how to handle and clean up all the waste and contamination that will be generated— as if Los Alamos has had a spotless record in this regard thus far. I am not going to read it— it is a macabre sideshow, like talking about reducing the smoke from the ovens of Auschwitz.

The environment I am concerned with— never even mentioned in the SWEIS— is the psychic environment that goes together with the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction.

I am concerned about the international environment that is created by trashing treaties such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Isn't our complicity and bad faith the reason that people all over the world see us as enemies? Isn't that the motivation behind proliferation of nuclear weapons in poor, backward places like Iran and North Korea? If the country with the largest conventional army needs nuclear weapons, don't we all?

I am concerned about how to control a privatized corporate nuclear weapon industry, now that the contract for Los Alamos' WMD factory has gone to Bechtel and the University of California. Don't corporations work to maximize profit for their shareholders— in this case, fomenting conflict all over so that there is a lively market for their product? What about congressional or regulatory oversight in this scenario? This concern is not farfetched: remember, the FBI had to fly in with helicopters in order to shut down Rocky Flats.

Declaring war on ill-defined concepts such as "terror" or "drugs" involves the prospect of endless wars without any measure of victory, and a totally arbitrary distinction between "the good guys" and "the bad guys." The only winners are the corporations that make the weapons, giving them an interest in privatizing conflict, and managing the public's perception through the media.

When more than 80 percent of the American public has expressed a desire for nuclear disarmament, yet the national laboratories such as the ones in New Mexico keep pursuing renewed testing, upgrading nuclear weapons and building a new pit production facility, there is something seriously wrong. The sheer magnitude of nuclear weapons and everything that comes with it— research, production, contamination, security— is incompatible with a functioning democracy.

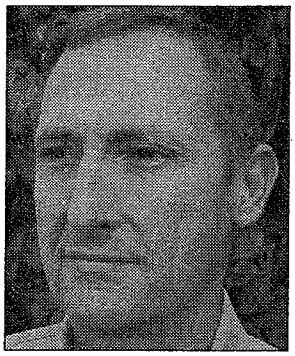
Democracy may have to be rebuilt from the bottom up. Neighborhoods, communities and cities are now the vehicles that express the people's will and have to represent the changes we are seeking. True security and democracy comes from a stronger sense of community, from getting closer. That is why it is significant that Santa Fe has adopted a second resolution against pit production in Los Alamos and in favor of strengthening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and other disarmament treaties. Being a city of peace and holy faith at this point means to resist the WMD facility called LANL on a mesa nearby.

The people of the world are watching and wondering if "We the People" are up to the task. Let's take courage. It started here; let's stop it here.

Malten is a baker, filmmaker and community activist in Santa Fe, as well as a longtime member of the Los Alamos Study Group.

Pit production: once begun, hard to control

GUEST COLUMNIST 9/14/06 Monitor



Greg Mello

In late 2007 Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) is slated to begin production of plutonium warhead cores ("pits") for the U.S. stockpile. If this occurs I believe it will the first time LANL has made pits for the stockpile since 1949 and it will be the first time the U.S. has produced new stockpile pits since 1989.

Producing pits for the stockpile has a number of serious implications for the lab, the town, and the country. Before discussing these, I would like to lay out some of what is publicly known about possible future pit production at LANL.

According to National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) budget submittals and the LANL draft site-wide environmental impact statement (SWEIS), the rate of pit production, now zero, is supposed to reach between 30 and 50 stockpile pits/year by 2012 if not before, or up to 80 pits/year including test pits and rejects.

The first pits to be made are for W88 475-kiloton submarine-launched warheads, to be made at a rate of 10 per year. Congressional budget submittals indicate that a total of 70 W88s are to be produced between early FY2008 and FY2014.

In addition, by 2012 if not well before (conflicting accounts are given) pits for at least one version of the "Reliable Replacement Warhead" (RRW) are slated to begin production.

According to NNSA chief Linton Brooks, RRWs are supposed to replace all the pits in the stockpile, expected to number about 6,000 in 2012. The first weapons to be replaced are the two Trident warheads, the W76 and W88.

The W76 is now in the beginning stages of a $2.5 billion upgrade, expected to extend its life for another 30 years. (This also happens to be the expected life of the RRW. Go figure.)

What will happen after 2012, the end of the SWEIS analysis period?

That depends on decisions made between now and then. One of the most crucial decisions is now pending before the Energy and Water Appropriations Conference Committee, namely whether to continue funding for the proposed Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement (CMRR) building.

The CMRR is a $1 billion, 400,000 square-foot facility that would provide pit production support at TA-55, among secondary purposes.

The House Appropriations Committee, led in this matter by David Hobson (R-OH), believes the CMRR is "irrational" and "absurd" and has proposed cutting all funding (last year) or nearly all funding (this year) for the project. Senator Domenici got the CMRR fully funded last year. This year's negotiations are still pending and it is unlikely that a decision will take place before the Nov. 7 elections.

How many pits might LANL make? Possibly all of them. Take a look at the Secretary of Energy Advisory Board (SEAB) report on the future of the nuclear weapons complex.

The SEAB, while generally endorsing the concept of a "Consolidated Nuclear Production Center" (CNPC) that would integrate all major nuclear activities at a single site, also advised that LANL's main plutonium building (PF-4) could produce 20 times as many pits per year as it now does. Depending on how one interprets this, PF-4's alleged potential production appears to be in the range of 200-400 pits/year.

NNSA's most recent admitted plan for large-scale pit production was the so-called Modern Pit Facility (MPF), a roughly $4 billion project capable of making 125-450 pits/year, originally to come on line circa 2020. LANL was the preferred site for the MPF from the technical perspective.

NNSA, having failed to sell this plan, now requests no funding for the MPF through at least 2011. Instead, the "realignment of prior Modern Pit Facility funding starting in FY 2007 will support NNSA planning to increase pit manufacturing capacity at LANL."

Looking at total pit-manufacturing sunk costs at LANL since 1995, DOE and NNSA have already spent about $2.5 billion in 2006 dollars laying the groundwork for pit production at LANL. A decade from now, NNSA (assuming its requests are funded), will have spent a few more billions of dollars on pit production at LANL (the exact number depending on what you want to count).

So 10 years from now, if all goes according to published plans, funds comparable in size and purpose to those anticipated for the MPF will have been spent at LANL and a production capacity comparable to the MPF will have been achieved.

How? NNSA plans to enable greater pit production capacity at LANL by a number of means. The first is new and refurbished facilities, centrally the CMRR, which is now in the early stages of design/build and is slated to begin operation in 2014.

In addition to the CMRR there is the "Plutonium Facility Complex Refurbishment Project," major security and transportation investments, expansion of the nuclear waste disposal area at TA-54, the "Radioactive Liquid Waste Treatment Facility Upgrade Project" in TA-50, and a TA-55 radiography facility, to pick only the most obvious.

Second, the Department of Energy (DOE) and NNSA hope to relocate plutonium-238 activities from PF-4 to the Idaho National Laboratory (INL), roughly doubling the floor space available to pit production in PF-4.

Third, the RRW will be designed for automated manufacture, with fewer "hands-on" steps, fewer hazardous materials, looser tolerances in key places, and fewer manufacturing steps and work stations overall.

These design changes, taken together and combined with other "agile" manufacturing innovations would enable, it is thought, much greater production rates.

Finally, reconfiguration of production equipment and relocation of stored material and light laboratory functions may liberate more PF-4 space and enable what is available to be used more efficiently for pit production.

If made, these investments will likely commit LANL to being the sole U.S. pit production facility. What other billions would be available for another?

Next time: the implications of pit production for the lab and the town.

Greg Mello is the director of the Los Alamos Study Group.

LOS ALAMOS

Nuke lab evacuations cited in federal probe

Incidents point to safety concerns in plutonium handling

- Keay Davidson, Chronicle Science Writer
Thursday, September 28, 2006

Power and ventilation failures at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico forced a half-dozen evacuations over the past four months from a building where radioactive plutonium is handled, according to a federal investigator.

No one was hurt in the employee evacuations, which date back to June 1, but the incidents point to continuing concern about the handling of radioactive materials for nuclear bombs at the lab, which is jointly run by the University of California, Bechtel Corp. and a few industrial partners.

The investigator, in memos to the U.S. Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board that monitors the safety of nuclear weapons labs, said the problems with the ventilation system occurred in a building within a complex set aside to deal with plutonium and other nuclear waste. Failure of the ventilation system can be hazardous because of the potential that plutonium might be sucked out of secure labs and through the structure, and possibly into the outside environment.

In a separate inspection, the investigator noted that half the weapons lab's storage containers for fast-accumulating amounts of plutonium used in bomb "pits" -- the explosive cores of nuclear weapons -- are possibly substandard and could lead to further safety issues.

The amount of plutonium and other radioactive waste is growing to the point "where they impact both (lab) mission and safety, virtually ensuring failure unless addressed as a priority," the investigator wrote in an Aug. 25 memo.

"Half of (the lab's) 9,000 nuclear material containers are nonstandard and suspect," the memo said. The inspector did not detail exactly what kind of accident might be represented as a "failure," but he said building TA-55 where the nuclear waste is stored, is so jammed with plutonium that it "is now near its residue storage capacity, and is within six months of having to curtail pit operations unless (the storage problem) is resolved."

The two memos, the first one dated Aug. 18, were written by an investigator for the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board, an official advisory agency to the U.S. Energy Department and its quasi-independent branch, the U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration. NNSA oversees the nation's nuclear weapons complex.

Kevin Roark, a Los Alamos spokesman, said the lab is moving to resolve some problems identified by the memos, while denying that some of them are even problems. He acknowledged the evacuations occurred -- he wasn't sure how often -- but said the ventilation systems continued to operate each time because a diesel emergency power system kicked into action. The evacuations were calm and orderly, no one was hurt, and no plutonium escaped during the incidents, he said.

Roark denied the memos' claim that half the lab's radioactive waste containers are "nonstandard and suspect."

Julianne Smith, a spokeswoman for the Nuclear Security Administration, made clear that "we expect (the UC-Bechtel partnership) to run the lab in the safest, most effective and cost-efficient way possible. Certainly safety is a top priority." If the lab management doesn't live up to its responsibilities, she added, "we'll hold them accountable -- there's financial and other ways to hold them accountable."

Greg ~~Miller~~ Mello, a leading activist and lab critic with the citizens Los Alamos Study Group, blames the crisis on the lab's rush to transform itself into the nation's central nuclear bomb-making factory: "They want to push this (bomb-making complex) through while President Bush is in office because it's a political window in which they can act."

E-mail Keay Davidson at kdavidson@sfchronicle.com.

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URL: http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2006/09/28/BAG3CLE5941.DTL

Friday, September 29, 2006

Lightning Prompted LANL Shutdowns

By John Arnold
Journal Staff Writer

Los Alamos National Laboratory officials blame lightning and external electrical problems for power failures that forced the lab to shut down part of its plutonium facility six times over the summer.

A federal safety investigator reported last month that power and ventilation problems led to evacuations at LANL's Technical Area-55, where the lab processes radioactive plutonium and produces nuclear bomb cores, or pits.

Lab spokesman Kevin Roark said Thursday that Technical Area-55's aging infrastructure, including its electrical system, are in need of upgrades but aren't responsible for this summer's power failures.

"There's an electrical line that comes off of the grid into the lab, and sometimes it goes out, especially when there are heavy thunderstorms," he said. "... we do know it's not our facility that's causing (the power failures)."

The plutonium processing facility was shut down as a precaution, because the staff at Technical Area-55 didn't want to put too much electrical load on the emergency generators, Roark said. No plutonium escaped from the building, and workers were never in danger, he added.

C.H. Keilers Jr., an investigator with the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board, has issued two recent memos describing infrastructure and safety concerns at Technical Area-55, which began operations in 1978.

Longstanding infrastructure problems have allowed plutonium residue and waste inventories "to grow to where they impact both mission and safety," Keilers writes in an Aug. 25 memo.

Half of LANL's 9,000 nuclear material containers "are non-standard and suspect," and problems at the facility that treats Technical Area-55's radioactive waste "is a potential single point of failure."

Because of problems at the waste treatment facility, Technical Area-55 is nearing its plutonium residue storage capacity, "and is within 6 months of having to curtail pit operations unless resolved," the memo states.

LANL spokesman James Rickman said Thursday that the lab has taken care of the waste processing backlog and doesn't anticipate that any plutonium operations will be interrupted. The waste treatment facility is in the process of being upgraded, and a new facility is scheduled for completion in 2011, he said.

Meanwhile, LANL is in the process of upgrading infrastructure systems at Technical Area-55, according to Roark.

"The infrastructure investment thing is a priority," he said.

Keilers notes in one memo that over the next six years, LANL wants to significantly expand plutonium operations, including pit production. The lab is currently cleared to produce up to 20 pits a year but is seeking approval to make up to 80.

Lab critics, however, question how Technical Area-55 can handle an expanded pit production mission, considering the state of its aging facilities.

"It's not clear even if they can be fixed, let alone at what cost," Los Alamos Study Group executive director Greg Mello said. "LANL wasn't built to be a production plant."

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Feds bid to transform weapons complex

ROGER SNODGRASS roger@lamonitor.com Monitor Assistant Editor

Los Alamos National Laboratory may get the full-time job that has gone vacant since the Rocky Flats facility was shuttered in 1989. LANL is currently the only place in the country where "pits," or triggers for nuclear weapons, can be produced
Whether it gets an even bigger assignment depends on factors to be weighed under a new Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, a quest embarked upon by the National Nuclear Security Administration on Thursday.

Ultimately, the decision hangs on yet-to-be-determined evaluations concerning the Defense Department's interest and pocketbook, numbers of pits to be produced, costs, transportation factors, how much nuclear material would need to be moved around, how well it could be protected and whether it would be more or less secure at Los Alamos than elsewhere, according to a senior NNSA official.

Among the first priorities of the proposal would be to select a site to be known as the "consolidated plutonium center," where a "baseline capacity of 125 qualified pits per year" would be produced.

Under the current draft environmental impact statement at LANL, NNSA has proposed an interim capability of 80 pits, in order to obtain 50 that can be certified.

The consolidated plutonium center would also be responsible for long-term research and development and surveillance in addition to manufacturing, according to the notice.

A spokesman for Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., said this morning the senator supports NNSA's objectives to modernize the nuclear weapons complex and to make it more cost-effective.

"He supports the forward movement, without saying specifically whether the laboratory should get this or that," said Chris Gallegos from the senator's office.

Concerning the plan to expand pit production, he added that a no action alternative to be included in the evaluation could "leave the pit capacity where it is now."

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., campaigning in New Mexico, responded to a question about the possibility that LANL might be selected for the consolidated plutonium center.

"Given the site's layout on a mesa with surrounding local communities, LANL does not appear to be suited to become home to the nation's central storage facility for weapons plutonium," Bingaman said.

A spokesman for Rep. Tom Udall, D-N.M., Tom Nagle said, "From the briefings we've had, it doesn't look like Los Alamos is the best place for this."

In addition to Los Alamos, other sites under consideration for the consolidated plutonium center are Nevada Test Site, Pantex Plant, Y-12 National Security Complex and the Savannah River Site.

The plan explicitly rejected the Secretary of Energy Advisory Board's task force suggestion that there be a single consolidated nuclear production center for all weapons-related activity involving a significant amount of nuclear materials, as well as its idea that the transformation could be accelerated to take place by 2015.

Kevin Roark, a spokesman for LANL, said this morning, the laboratory has been working with NNSA on the Complex 2030 plan for some time.

"It's very early in the process," he said. "None of the

plan is decided yet."

If the task of production does fall to Los Alamos, NNSA Deputy Director for Defense Programs Thomas D'Agostino's view is that managing a national scientific laboratory is not the same as managing a nuclear pit manufacturing facility and may even require a separate manager at Los Alamos.

The major revision in the way the country organizes work on its nuclear stockpile arises 15 years after the fall of the Soviet Union and was described as an effort to transform and modernize the Cold-War-era nuclear weapons complex.

"I feel a sense of urgency," D'Agostino said, comparing the complex to an old house or automobile. "You have to keep pouring money in it to keep it going," he said. "Meanwhile the world has changed dramatically."

NNSA is relying on a new concept, known as the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW), to enable the complex to modernize and become sustainable for the long run. Although RRW is barely mentioned in the initial document, it is an apparent catalyst for change throughout.

NNSA Administrator Linton Brooks has described RRWs as "replacements for existing stockpile weapons that could be more easily manufactured with more readily available and more environmentally benign materials, and whose safety and reliability could be assured with the highest confidence, without nuclear testing, for as long as the United States requires nuclear forces."

An RRW design competition between LANL and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California concluded recently, but the results are still being evaluated.

The Bush administration's doctrine on nuclear weapons, the Nuclear Posture Review of 2002, called for a nuclear stockpile that reflected that the Cold War is over and contains the lowest possible number of warheads for current security needs.

D'Agostino emphasized significant reductions in the

size of the nuclear stockpile and plans for reduction under the Treaty of Moscow, in which the U.S. and Russia agreed to limit themselves to1700-2200 operationally-deployed nuclear weapons by 2012.

To that number the notice added "augmentation weapons, reliability reserve weapons and weapons required to meet NATO commitments."

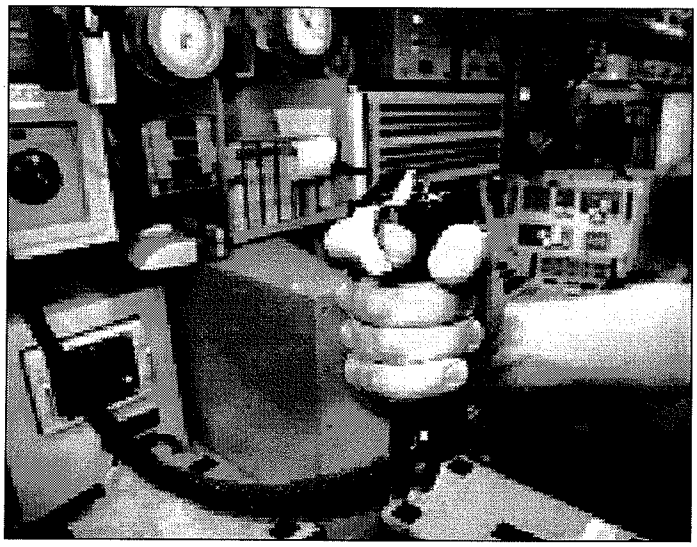
The apparently new category of "augmentation weapons" is not defined in the document, noted Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, among several nuclear watchdogs who are following the new developments.

The Alliance for Nuclear Accountability, a national network of watchdog groups called the plan a "bombplex" and said the Reliable Replacement Warhead "will potentially drive a new nuclear weapons arms race, in order to carry out the expanded first strike options envisioned in the 2002 Nuclear Posture Review."

Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group said whether people were in favor or opposed to pit production at LANL, we would have to come to grips with a fundamental problem.

"We can't just provide management review for one proposal after another to make more nuclear weapons," he said. "The country needs to decide whether we're gong to make nuclear weapons the centerpiece of world security, which means everybody is going to have to get them, or whether we're going to lead the way to a safer world where nuclear weapons can be everywhere condemned."

Thursday's announcement kicks off a 90-day scoping and comment period that will end on Jan. 17, 2007.



This is the launch trigger for Trident missiles on an Ohio-class submarine. If loaded with eight W88 warheads, one missile contains more explosive power than all the explosives used in World War II. Photo from *Face to Face with the Bomb: Nuclear Reality after the Cold War* by Paul Shambroom, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

http://www.eldoradosun.com/Mello.htm

PERSONAL PRACTICAL GLOBAL
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Plutonium Pit Manufacturing and the Quest for Nuclear Credibility

Greg Mello

Late next year, if all goes as planned, Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) is slated to begin production of plutonium warhead cores ("pits") for the U.S. nuclear stockpile. The United States has produced no new pits since 1989, and because of this it has produced no entirely new warheads since then either. If and when LANL begins production, warhead manufacturing will start up at a handful of plants around the country again, after a hiatus of some 18 years.

Whether this happens or not depends substantially on whether citizens in northern New Mexico want plutonium manufacturing as their fastest-growing industry, and on whether, how

and with what firmness they express their desires in the matter. If indeed production does get up and running — which has been the central purpose of the transformations forced on the lab over the past few years — LANL's rate of manufacturing pits will determine the overall U.S. weapons-production rate, since making pits is the hardest and the slowest part of the entire process.

LANL has not had this job since 1949. The facilities in which production is gearing up to take place weren't built with this in mind and are decades old. They need major renovation and are plagued by long-standing safety issues. Despite their intense interest in getting pit production running at LANL as fast and hard as possible, there is as yet no clear sign that either the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) or the Bechtel-led consortium that runs LANL has budgeted enough money or time to solve these problems. Neither do they have a clear plan as to how to make pits while also carrying out the major renovations needed in the facilities being used.

Whether despite these problems or because of them, $2.5 billion in inflation-corrected dollars has been spent at LANL since 1995 to get ready for the day, should it come, when the first shiny little pit — a "keeper," not one made for testing — comes off the line. A pit is built like an ellipsoidal or spherical ball with one or more metallic shells inside — somewhat like a nesting *matryoshka* doll — with the innermost shell made of plutonium.

Another $3 billion or more is slated to be spent between now and 2014 to sustain and increase LANL's pit production, of which fully $2 billion is for new and improved facilities. By 2014, the rate of production is projected to rise to at least 50 pits per year. Following that, production is supposed to speed up further as new facilities begin to come online. Last year the Secretary of Energy Advisory Board said LANL could make, and therefore *should* make, about 200 pits per year.

When (and if) completed, pits made at LANL would be sent to the Pantex assembly plant located a few miles east of Amarillo, Texas. There, in semiunderground chambers, each of these metal eggs would be surrounded by high explosives and provided with a few other parts. At this point the device would become, in effect, a small atomic bomb, capable of releasing the explosive energy of a whole trainload of explosives.

If this assembly, called a "primary" in the weapons-of-mass-destruction trade, is then placed in a uranium shell along with a "secondary" thermonuclear explosive, some rigid foam and a couple of other parts, the result is a "nuclear explosive package," or "physics package." When this is put in a cone-shaped shell (a "reentry vehicle") with a variety of electrical and mechanical parts, it becomes a nuclear warhead, in this case a high-yield warhead called a "W88." W88s have an explosive yield of almost a half million tons of TNT.

The warheads are next loaded onto missiles. Up to eight W88s are placed on a platform called a "bus" (so called because the warheads get off the "bus" independently for their different destinations) inside a Trident missile. Twenty-four such missiles are loaded into each of 14 Ohio-class submarines.

Loaded in this way, just one of these missiles carries the equivalent of all the explosive power used in World War II. Just one of these warheads, if exploded at full yield over a large city, would kill hundreds of thousands of people by blast, radioactivity and the ensuing firestorm. It's the firestorm that military planners especially don't like to talk about, even more than fallout. Its

widespread, total destruction contradicts the "precision" targeting ideals deeply ingrained in U.S. military culture.

How many such explosions would be necessary before full societal collapse occurred? Not too many, probably, if key spots are targeted.

THE CRAFTSMAN'S LEGACY

Present nuclear threats and future nuclear strikes begin with that metal Easter egg, so hard to make — thin, heavy and a bit warm to the touch. At Los Alamos and afterward, with each successive step of assembly and then deployment, a monstrous reality takes shape: a very real and eminently portable hell on Earth, deliverable to any nation or people within 30 minutes guaranteed — an efficient, high-tech holocaust-on-demand. Once such a machine is assembled, the right person — it needn't be the president, you know — can switch it on with no more than a few strokes on a keyboard or a few spoken words.

Those who make plutonium pits hope they will just sit in a bunker for decades, but the fact is, once their craftsmanship is done they have no more say in the matter. The time when they could have saved lives and been faithful to human ideals will be past. Long after those who make them die, those nested metal balls may remain in careful readiness, a lasting legacy of terror, waiting for the word that would doom a hundred thousand families. It happened before, with a pit made in Los Alamos.

Those who plan such a thing and work to make it possible say they hope it will never happen. Well, that and a buck fifty will get you a cup of coffee, because without an utterly credible threat, nuclear weapons have no coercive value — which means no value at all. At the worker-bee level, "no value" translates into "no job" and "no paycheck." How could the threat of nuclear attack be credible to an enemy but not to us? Either the threat is credible — that is, real — or it's not.

Former Sandia Labs president Paul Robinson used to say that it's "overwhelming terror" that puts the "terr" in nuclear deterrence. Producing that same overwhelming terror puts thousands of paychecks in New Mexico bank accounts. Poor New Mexico — the quaint and complaisant little *colonia* where the United States does almost half of its warhead work, including the dirty and dangerous jobs nobody else wants. Poor New Mexico — so far from God, so close to Los Alamos. Denial of these realities is one of the defining cultural features of Santa Fe today; there is far less denial in the Espanola Valley. Those who think this has been good for New Mexico will have to explain to the rest of us why the state's income rankings have fallen so low relative to other states at the same time the labs' budgets have risen so high.

But wait. Aren't there "surgical" nuclear missions, very special missions in today's world that only nuclear weapons can do — like destroying bad guys or germ-warfare agents in deep bunkers, like in the movies? Isn't there a role there for a new kind of nuclear strike force, aka "deterrent"?

It's too long a story for this article to take up these cases and others one at a time. But the bottom line is this: From a strictly military perspective, all the military problems for which new nuclear weapons — earth-penetrating nukes, mininukes, any nukes — are supposed to provide solutions either have other far better military solutions or no military solutions at all. This is true

even from the most callous military and strategic perspective, the imperial perspective from which these things are typically viewed in the halls of power today.

Once all the euphemisms and the self-serving, illogical fantasies are stripped away (these fantasies are far more common among civilian nuclear promoters than in the military), those who think they see military value in nuclear weapons are not thinking about the big picture hard enough. Most New Mexicans, long accustomed to the "national security" mantle wrapped around the labs, are usually surprised to learn that most military brass don't like nuclear weapons very much, for a heap of good reasons.

PRESERVING THE PRIESTHOOD

Today the United States has about 23,000 pits, give or take a thousand or two. There are almost 10,000 in weapons, of which perhaps 2,000 reside in an underground bunker complex about a mile south of Albuquerque's Sunport. (There are more nuclear weapons in that bunker than anywhere else on Earth.) The rest of the pits are stored at the Pantex Plant near Amarillo. Of those, 5,000 have been designated a "strategic reserve" to be kept in case something goes wrong with deployed pits.

Nobody knows for sure how long all these pits will last. The official minimum lifespan is still "45 to 60 years" — two different numbers, giving all of us ample notice of what a finely tuned enterprise this is (not!). Some advisors to NNSA, the agency that runs the weapons labs and plants, believe pit longevity may be significantly greater than 60 years. This would of course greatly affect any "need" to make new pits. Pits, it seems, can even "improve" with age as their inherent radiation anneals away internal irregularities.

If we don't crush and dispose of them first, future generations may figure out the shelf life of pits. Or maybe they never will, having more important things to do. We know, however, when pits were made. We can say, for example, that if the U.S. government so decides, there will still be 6,000 pits that are 60 years of age or less in 2045. Since that's almost four decades from now, perhaps even die-hard nuclear aficionados ought not to panic about "pit aging."

Pit aging (and warhead aging overall) is not the reason NNSA wants to restart nuclear-warhead production — workforce aging is. To keep the nuclear enterprise going, nuclear skills, knowledge, values and culture must be transmitted to a new generation. Through new designs and new manufacturing, NNSA and its allies seek to renew the labs and manufacturing plants in every way possible.

NNSA understands what many well-meaning liberal activists do not: the nuclear enterprise is fragile, weak and as dependent upon unwritten knowledge, belief and a supporting social consensus as it is upon hardware and money. Polls show there is no support for anything but a declining nuclear-weapons enterprise headed for mutual disarmament pursuant to treaties already signed and ratified. So a great deal of effort is put into fabricating an illusion of legitimacy, especially inside the labs and plants themselves, where workers can be easily indoctrinated.

THE QUEST FOR CREDIBILITY

The only other reason pit production is needed is because NNSA wants new kinds of weapons that won't "self-deter," as they put it. "Self-deterrence" is the strategic equivalent of

conscience. If only nuclear weapons weren't so powerful, the story goes; if only they were more accurate, more flexible as to yield; if only we could be sure that nobody could get hold of a dud and use it; if only bombs could burrow another few meters into the earth; if only they had a more powerful electromagnetic pulse so they could be detonated in a place and manner that would not cause as much (political) fallout — if only they were different and better, they could be more easily used and so the threats we make with them would be more credible.

In other words, new weapons are "needed" because nobody has yet been able to come up with a convincing use for the existing ones. Since this is America, the answer must lie in technological progress. Of course, all the existing nuclear weapons were once said to be "solutions" to the credibility problems of prior weapons, and so on back.

As stated before, none of the technical proposals for new nuclear weapons are convincing from a military point of view. They blow things up and kill a lot of people, and they do so in a way that makes the overall military and strategic situation much worse, in every possible case. None solve the overwhelming moral, political, legal, military and strategic problems that accompany every contemplated use of nuclear weapons and that indeed lie in the contemplation and in the weapons themselves.

But NNSA knows its real audience, which is in Washington, D.C., not Tehran or Beijing. The key people who must be convinced sit on a few congressional committees. In Washington a more credible deterrent *does* require new warheads and, hence, new pits. Increased credibility to that small audience — the audience that really counts — happens not because the warheads are different or "better," but because they are *new*. Sheer momentum and investment per se, the gloss of newness, is indeed the coin of the realm. Investment creates belief, which is to say credibility. Investment creates value, as any stockbroker knows. So new pits and new warheads, if pursued, will definitely create a more credible deterrent — to budget cuts. It is not at all clear that there is any other nuclear deterrence.

The sales problem for NNSA, the labs and advocates like Senator Domenici is that while "credible" is a nice word to a politician's ear, and an important one too, "usable" in connection with nuclear weapons is not. And the path to a more "credible" deterrent lies only through more "usable" weapons. "Usable" translates pretty quickly into "stupid," "deeply wrong" or even "suicidal" for people who don't have a financial or career interest in nuclear weapons.

In the final analysis, NNSA's core argument is that we must make pits . . . in order to make pits. It will cost us our self-respect, our environment, about $100 billion or so — and all hope of preventing nuclear proliferation. Are we going to do this, or not? I hope you will reflect on this personally because Congress is largely asleep at the switch on this question, leaving this decision largely up to "we the people" in practical terms.

What can be done? There is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question; political effectiveness is usually a very sensitive function of time and commitment, but there are very simple things you can do as well. Please write me at gmello@lasg.org or call our main office at (505) 265-1200 if you think you might want to help. Or visit www.lasg.org and look through the recent "Action Alerts" for more background on the issues and ways to work against the appalling plans to resume nuclear warhead manufacturing after all these years.

Monday, December 4, 2006

Labs at Center of Pits Debate Again

By John Arnold

As New Mexicans weigh in this week on the National Nuclear Security Administration's new-look nuclear weapons complex, Los Alamos National Laboratory once again finds itself in the middle of a debate over if and where to put a next-generation nuclear weapons factory.

Beginning today, the nuclear security administration will conduct a series of hearings across the state on "Complex 2030," the agency's long-term vision for consolidating nuclear weapons operations and modernizing its aging Cold War arsenal with a new warhead design.

Under the plan, Los Alamos is one of five sites the agency is considering for a new plutonium center, which would churn out the round, radioactive bomb cores, or pits, needed to fuel nuclear weapons.

It's not the first time.

In 2002, LANL was one of five sites considered for a manufacturing plant called the Modern Pit Facility. But lack of congressional support doomed the proposal.

The NNSA's newest plan is also facing scrutiny on Capitol Hill, especially in light of a new plutonium study delivered to Congress last week.

The study, which determined that pits have a much longer lifespan than previously thought, has some members of New Mexico's congressional delegation questioning whether the country needs additional pit manufacturing capabilities or the new weapon design known as the reliable replacement warhead.

"I have always had serious questions as to whether the (reliable replacement warhead) program constitutes the development of new weapons, which would be counter to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. ... Now, with the added information about the longevity of pits, the (warhead) may not be necessary," said Rep. Tom Udall, D-N.M.

Both Udall and Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., called for hearings next year to determine whether the new weapon is needed.

Bingaman said regardless of what happens with the new warhead, LANL is not the best choice for a permanent facility to produce pits.

Not only does Bingaman have concerns about security and the additional nuclear waste that would be created by such a facility, but "(LANL) has always been a science lab, so it doesn't necessarily fit in with the mission of the lab," said Jude McCartin, the senator's spokesman.

Future mission

What the future holds for LANL's mission under Complex 2030 is far from clear.

The nation's last pit factory, Rocky Flats near Denver, closed in 1989, making LANL the only site in the country capable of manufacturing pits.

The lab makes a handful each year for research and the W88 warhead. The government, however, is seeking approval to increase production to 80 pits a year.

Under Complex 2030, LANL would manufacture pits for the reliable replacement

warhead until a permanent plutonium manufacturing center is built sometime in the early 2020s.

Although Los Alamos is on the short list for the permanent center, nuclear security administration officials don't think the lab is ideal because it would be more difficult to secure than other potential sites, according to Tom D'Agostino, the agency's deputy administrator for defense programs. LANL's aging facilities also present a challenge.

Complex 2030 calls for the eventual production of 125 pits a year. LANL's plutonium center, Technical Area 55, was built in the 1970s and isn't equipped to handle such a workload, D'Agostino said.

"(LANL's plutonium facility) is designed as a set of research bays and for doing work in an incremental way," D'Agostino said. "It's not laid out as a modern manufacturing plant would be laid out, so it's less than ideal."

Still, D'Agostino acknowledges that LANL's existing resources and experienced personnel make Los Alamos a site worth considering. If it is chosen to host the consolidated center, the plutonium facility would likely not be part of the laboratory, but would be managed by a separate entity, he said.

Capacity levels

The recently released plutonium aging study also raises another possibility.

What if the nuclear security administration doesn't need to produce 125 pits a year and can make do with 80 or fewer?

Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., said last week that in light of the study, "It is possible that we will not need the same level of capacity as originally proposed."

Jay Coghlan, director of the watchdog group Nuclear Watch New Mexico, thinks that if Complex 2030 requires fewer new pits, LANL is more likely to host a permanent pit manufacturing mission.

Activists say LANL's pit production future could also hinge on a political variable—funding for one of Domenici's pet projects, a new billion-dollar lab building known as the chemistry and metallurgy research facility.

The new building, already under construction, would replace a deteriorating lab Los Alamos needs for plutonium work. But the project has yet to be fully funded, and some in Congress are questioning it.

If plutonium work is going to be moved to a new consolidated site, the chemistry and metallurgy research building "will have a very limited functional lifetime," according to a budget report submitted earlier this year by Rep. David Hobson, R-Ohio. Hobson chairs the House Appropriations subcommittee that works on the Department of Energy's spending plan.

Research facility

The chemistry and metallurgy research facility only makes sense if the consolidated plutonium facility is located at Los Alamos, Hobson said. His spending plan cuts nearly all funding for the project, while Domenici is requesting $112 million.

"If we build a new production facility— that's what (chemistry and metallurgy research) is— then it becomes extremely hard to stop pit production. Since we don't need to do it for a long time, we shouldn't be investing in it," said Los Alamos Study Group director Greg Mello.

Domenici and his staff say the chemistry and metallurgy research facility will be needed

in the future regardless of where plutonium is processed, because weapons designers at Los Alamos will always need to work with plutonium on an experimental level, if not for full-scale pit production.

Last week, the Nuclear Weapons Council— a group of senior Department of Defense and DOE officials— determined after reviewing the first reliable replacement warhead designs that the program is feasible and should be pursued.

NNSA says the nation's nuclear weapons arsenal— built to fight the Cold War— is outdated and in dire need of an overhaul.

Complex 2030 and the reliable replacement warhead program aim to create a secure arsenal better suited for 21st century threats, D'Agostino said. State-of-the-art weapons technology in the replacement warhead design would prevent unauthorized use by terrorists, and a consolidated plutonium center would allow storage of bomb-grade plutonium at a single, high-security area rather than at sites scattered around the country.

Supporters also argue that the new warhead would make the arsenal less expensive, safer and easier to maintain, creating a "responsive" weapons infrastructure that would allow the government to dismantle more old weapons.

"The beautiful thing in my view about all of this is it enables us to reduce the size of the nuclear weapons stockpile and start dismantling warheads at a much faster pace than we have before," D'Agostino said.

Critics don't buy that argument.

Creating a new nuclear weapon sends the wrong message to other countries with nuclear ambitions, they say.

"It's an inopportune time to start manufacturing nuclear weapons," said the Los Alamos Study Group's Mello. "You can be sure we'll hear about it from (Iranian president) Mr. Ahmadinejad and (North Korea's) Kim Jong Il."

Complex 2030 hearings

The National Nuclear Security Administration will take comments on the scope of its environmental study on its plan to overhaul the nation's nuclear weapons complex.

Hearings are scheduled in New Mexico as follows:

- 6 to 10 p.m. today, New Mexico Tech's Macey Center, 801 Leroy Place, Socorro.
- 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 6 to 10 p.m. Tuesday, the Albuquerque Convention Center, 401 Second St. NW, Albuquerque.
- 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Wednesday, Hilltop House Best Western, 400 Trinity Drive, Los Alamos.
- 6 to 10 p.m. Wednesday, Genoveva Chavez Community Center, 3221 Rodeo Road, Santa Fe.

For more information, visit www.complex2030peis.com.

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INFERIORITY COMPLEX

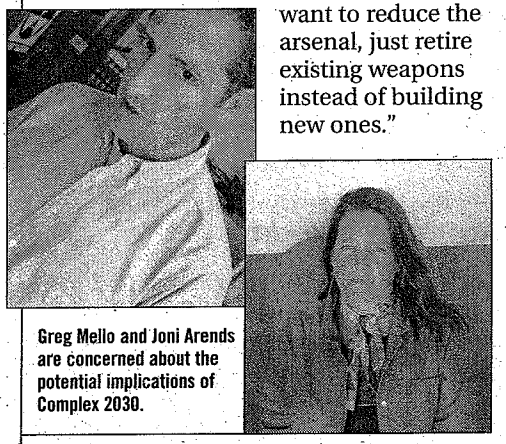
Activists speak out on nuclear future.

BY NATHAN DINSDALE
nate@sfreporter.com

"Complex 2030" sounds like a bad science-fiction movie. Something starring Kurt Russell wearing an eye patch, Vin Diesel in a pair of Ray-Bans or John Travolta sporting a terrible haircut.

Except it's worse. At least according to local anti-nuclear activists like Greg Mello, executive director of the Los Alamos Study Group.

"They're essentially proposing to replace the entire US nuclear arsenal with itself," Mello says. "Complex 2030 is supposed to be about having a smaller, more efficient arsenal, but if you want to reduce the arsenal, just retire existing weapons instead of building new ones."



Greg Mello and Joni Arends are concerned about the potential implications of Complex 2030.

Complex 2030—called "Bombplex 2030" by anti-nuclear activists—is the National Nuclear Security Administration's (NNSA) vision for the future of the US nuclear arsenal. According to the NNSA, Complex 2030 is intended to "establish a smaller, more efficient nuclear weapons complex" by developing new warheads, dismantling "retired" warheads and consolidating weapons at fewer sites.

"Complex 2030 is a broad transformation of the nuclear weapons complex," NNSA spokeswoman Julianne Smith says. "What we have now was built in the Cold War for a Cold War adversary, but our potential adversaries have evolved. This is about modernizing for the future."

New Mexico sites like Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), Sandia National Laboratory and the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in Carlsbad could be integral to the Complex 2030 vision. LANL in particular figures prominently in the Oct. 19 Notice of Intent issued by the NNSA.

"We were surprised at just how much focus is being placed on Los Alamos," Joni Arends, executive director of the Santa Fe organization Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, says. "It looks like LANL is a primary location for this proposed consolidation."

The Notice of Intent is the first step in the process. The second is hosting public hearings in communities near eight federal nuclear sites (including in Santa Fe on Dec. 6 at 6 pm at the Genoveva Chavez Community Center) to discuss NNSA plans to conduct an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in conjunction with the proposal.

"All eight of our sites would figure into Complex 2030," Smith says. "To say one is more important than another would not be right."

But those plans also include establishing a "consolidated plutonium center" for nuclear research, development and production as well as choosing a site.

"Part of this environmental process that we're going through now is picking that location," Smith says. "Currently there are five sites being considered, and Los Alamos is one of them."

The project is far from a reality. The NNSA plans to have a draft EIS ready by next summer, but a final EIS isn't expected until spring 2008. The design for the Consolidated Plutonium Center wouldn't be complete until 2012 and the facility wouldn't be operational until 2022.

"We're a long way off," Smith says. "These are just the first steps in a very long process."

Arends and Mello question whether the steps need to be taken at all. A study released last week by a group of independent scientists (called the JASON panel) also questions whether the country's aging nuclear stockpile needs to be replaced at all. According to the study, current weapons are capable of remaining effective for 100 years, more than twice the Department of Energy (DOE) estimate.

"I think the entire premise for Complex 2030 has become null and void," Arends says. "The DOE needs to go back to the drawing board and come up with a new proposal."

That isn't likely. Smith says the study won't effect NNSA plans to move forward with its plans for Complex 2030.

"There are certain infrastructure changes that we need to go forward with," Smith says, "and we have every intention of going forward with them."