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Paper: Santa Fe New Mexican, The (NM)
Title: MAIN
Date: January 25, 1996

Los Alamos National Laboratory is a potential site for almost all aspects of bomb production work in the scaled down nuclear weapons complex planned for the 21st century, according to a report released Wednesday by the Department of Energy.

The ``Implementation Plan'' identifies Los Alamos as one of two sites under consideration for work the laboratory has not performed since the 1950s: building plutonium cores for bombs in the nuclear arsenal.

The other possible site is the DOE's Savannah River plant in South Carolina.

Los Alamos is one of three sites under review for the manufacture of another key nuclear weapon part for stockpile bombs: ``secondaries,'' which contain uranium.

The other sites under consideration are Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California and the Oak Ridge facility in Tennessee. Oak Ridge is where most of the DOE's weapons-related uranium work has been centered in the past.

Los Alamos and Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque are both candidates to build non-nuclear components that contain high explosives.

The lab may also be called on to examine plutonium cores -- called ``pits -- in existing weapons to ensure they are still sound.

Additionally, the plan says that above-ground nuclear testing facilities -- some of which could be at Los Alamos -- could take the place of full-scale underground nuclear tests, which have been banned since 1992.

At Los Alamos, such facilities include the partially constructed Dual-Axis Radiographic Hydrotest Facility, which is tied up in the courts because of a challenge by two Santa Fe activist groups, and the not-yet-built Atlas Facility, which would look at radiation and aging effects on existing stockpile weapons.

The plan rejects other possible approaches to the handling of the nuclear arsenal in the 21st century, including dismantling it altogether, restoring it to its Cold War proportions, or simply performing maintenance work as bomb parts age.

The plan provides the most detailed picture yet of what Los Alamos' role would be in a future nuclear weapons production complex. The DOE is expected to release a ``draft environmental impact statement'' in coming weeks that should provide greater clarity about the roles DOE is proposing for Los Alamos.

The implementation plan was blasted by a local activist.

``This document is an elaborate rationalization for an illogical and incredible continuation of nuclear pork throughout the country,'' said Greg Mello of the **Los Alamos Study Group**.

Last year, John Immele, program director for nuclear weapons technology at the lab, said the lab was ``looking forward to playing a role in a smaller (nuclear weapons) complex.''

Immele said maintaining the ``capability for small lot fabrication'' at Los Alamos would reduce the nuclear danger by maintaining the deterrent value of the U.S. arsenal.

At the same time, he said such an approach ``may be the most inexpensive way to go'' and ``might be the best thing for the country.''

It has long been suspected that Los Alamos might take on plutonium production responsibilities since it is the only place still operating in the country with the capability to build significant numbers of pits.

It has been less clear that other work, such as manufacturing uranium secondaries, might also be centered at the lab.

The plan does not specify how many plutonium pits the lab would be expected to build annually. Both lab and

DOE officials have said publicly in the past year that a probable number is about 50 pits per year. This compares with the more than 1,000 pits a year that used to be built at the Rocky Flats plant near Denver.

Author: Keith Easthouse
Section: MAIN
Page: A-1

LANL to get $300 million for upgrades

2/29/96

By KEITH EASTHOUSE
The New Mexican

Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary said the plan could provide employment for as many as 275 workers.

WASHINGTON — The Department of Energy plans to pump $300 million into facility upgrades at Los Alamos National Laboratory from 1998 to 2005 as part of its new approach of managing the nation's existing nuclear stockpile, rather than building new weapons.

The plan, which is in draft form, could provide employment for as many as 275 workers at the lab, Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary said at a news conference Wednesday.

The new plan, known as "stockpile stewardship," requires department officials to monitor the existing nuclear arsenal and provide upgrades when necessary. President Clinton's decision to halt production of new weapons and ban all nuclear testing forced the DOE to adopt this approach.

The department will rely on Los Alamos to do work that used to be performed at the Rocky Flats facility near Denver: building plutonium cores, or "pits," for weapons in the nuclear stockpile.

Previously, Los Alamos has built small numbers of pits each year, but only for experimental purposes.

According to lab officials, there is some uncertainty about how many pits the lab will be required to build each year as it replaces aging components in existing weapons.

Estimates range from 20 to 80 per year, with 50 being the most likely number. That would provide employment for 150 workers, according to Tim Neal, program manager for materials and

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LANL

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process technologies at the lab.

In the event of a worsening of international tensions or a discovery of a serious flaw in an existing weapons system, the lab might be called on to build up to 80 pits per year, providing employment to 260 workers, Neal said.

Neal said such a production level would be the maximum the lab could handle, even with the planned upgrades to facilities.

Most of the production-related positions would be filled by existing employees shifted from other work, Neal said. There will be some "new hires," however.

Los Alamos will also be home to a $48 million weapons testing facility called Atlas under the plan unveiled by O'Leary. Another 15 jobs would be required to operate the Atlas facility, according to the DOE.

The $300 million for Los Alamos represents the lion's share of the $500 million the DOE plans to spend for upgrades at all its sites.

However, T.J. Trapp, acting deputy program director for nuclear materials and stockpile management at the lab, said half of that money will be spent on upgrades that would have to have been performed whether or not pit fabrication responsibilities had been handed to Los Alamos.

About $100 million will go toward remodeling a wing at Technical Area 55, the lab's plutonium facility, according to the DOE plan.

The remaining $50 million will be spent on equipment related to supporting the fabrication work. This pot of money might also be used to redo two wings of another facility, the Chemical and Metallurgical Research building, Trapp said.

Last June, it looked as if all aspects of nuclear weapons production work might be handed to Los Alamos. But even though it appears the lab's role will be limited to plutonium work, the change still promises to be controversial.

Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group, a Santa Fe organization, said the DOE's plan was a "triumph for the plutonium priesthood at LANL."

Public hearings on the plan are scheduled for March 26 at Los Alamos and April 23 in Santa Fe.

Paul Kane of States News Service contributed to this report.

Publication: Jnl Legacy 1995 to July 2005; Date: Feb 29, 1996; Section: Journal North<; Page: 68

Date--02/29/1996 Edition--Journal North Page--1

LANL'S NUCLEAR WORK TO EXPAND

Richard Parker Journal Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary on Wednesday made it official: She wants Los Alamos National Laboratory to make replacement triggers for nuclear warheads as the rest of the country's weapons complex shrinks.

O'Leary made the announcement -- long anticipated in New Mexico and in arms control circles -- as she unveiled the future shape of the complex that manufactures and maintains the country's nuclear weapons.

The plan involves consolidating the complex to eight sites, from a high in the late 1980s of 11, in direct response to drives toward broader arms control. The Senate passed the START II agreement in January, and the Clinton administration, having adopted a test ban, is pressing other governments to agree to a global Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

The Energy Department, O'Leary said Wednesday, would help fulfill the test ban "while maintaining an effective, reliable -- but safe -- nuclear deterrent."

Defense spending on nuclear weapons maintenance has fallen from $2.5 billion in 1985 to $1.5 billion this year. The new plan projects that annual spending will fall to $1 billion by 2005. Before the turn of the century, O'Leary said, the department plans to begin disposing of weapons-grade plutonium by burning it in reactors, sealing it in ceramics or burying it deep beneath the earth's surface.

Eight sites around the country will play a greater role in maintaining the nuclear deterrent, and that includes weapons laboratories in New Mexico. The role of weapons laboratories has grown with the ban on below-ground testing in Nevada. Instead, simulations and studies of weapons cores are used to study their reliability.

Los Alamos would be responsible for small-scale production of plutonium pits, the triggers in a warhead.

"It's a small capability for pit manufacturing," said Steve Guidice, an assistant manager of the DOE's Albuquerque Operations Office, who headed the restructuring of the weapons complex. "But it's an essential capability we need to be able to protect."

Department officials emphasized that the triggers -- grapefruit-size plutonium spheres -- are intended as replacement parts for the existing arsenal.

The government will spend $520 million on defense programs at Los Alamos this year. DOE would begin to move its pit manufacturing to Los Alamos beginning in 1998, adding 260 workers to the 3,200 dedicated to defense work at the lab.

Lab spokesman Jim Danneskiold said the department's job estimates are inflated. He said pit production should require between 90 and 150 jobs a year depending on the number produced. He said the lab would need 260 workers only in case of a national emergency.

Anti-nuclear activists in Santa Fe decried the department's decision to do production work at the Los

Alamos lab.

"We're literally seeing the lab returning to its roots, and those roots are nuclear weapons programs," said Jay Coghlin of Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety. "These decisions are predetermining and fixing LANL's future. It's a future that won't be to the broader benefit of northern New Mexico."

Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group said he feared the proposed pit production at Los Alamos could open the door to the production of new nuclear weapons.

Pit production "will certainly increase the capacity for plutonium handling. Therefore, it is likely to carry with it increased waste generation and the potential for accidents," Mello said.

He said it would be the first time since the 1950s that Los Alamos has been involved in manufacturing a key element of nuclear weapons.

Danneskiold said the lab makes about one dozen pits a year for research and development purposes. He said its new role will not mean a substantial increase in what the lab is doing.

While the department considered other sites for making the pits, it concluded that Los Alamos was its best choice because it already has the ability. During the 1980s, the lab manufactured pits during breakdowns at the Rocky Flats, Colo., weapons plant.

Assistant DOE Secretary Victor Reis said the pits at Los Alamos would be dry-machined, avoiding one of the many environmental problems that eventually led to Rocky Flats' closure.

The department estimated Los Alamos would make as many as 50 a year -- far fewer than previous estimates -- to replace aging triggers or those removed from missiles for sampling.

The number of pits is so small that department officials said the Los Alamos project is intended primarily to preserve the U.S. ability to make the triggers if a crisis should arise. They estimated that they would have about five years to launch a larger pit-making enterprise, possibly elsewhere, if necessary.

The reorganization also will lead to the construction at Los Alamos of Atlas, a pulsed-power machine used to measure the initial dynamics of a nuclear explosion. The data would be used in computer simulations of a full blast. Anti-nuclear activists have charged that the United States is, in principle, violating its test-ban right by modeling the effects of nuclear detonations.

No change is expected at Sandia National Laboratories as a result of Wednesday's announcement.

And the department does not plan to store plutonium from old weapons at the Manzano storage area near Kirtland Air Force Base. Manzano was rejected, in part, because of its proximity to Albuquerque.

The department also is weighing the possibility of making high-explosive components for weapons at Los Alamos; they now are made near Amarillo.

The department's plan does not reduce the role of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, as a previous independent panel of experts suggested. The department plan concludes that the test ban means weapons labs will be even more central in ensuring that weapons are reliable.

Publication: Jnl Legacy 1995 to July 2005; Date: Feb 29, 1996; Section: Final<; Page: 2

Date--02/29/1996 Edition--Final Page--A1

LANL'S N-WORK EXPANDS

Richard Parker Journal Washington Bureau

LAB TOLD TO MAKE WARHEAD TRIGGERS

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Albuquerque Journal North

·OTHER VOICES·

Nuclear Mafia Remains Active

BY GREG MELLO

The Cold War is over, right? Nuclear stockpiles in the U.S. and Russia will soon decline to 3,500 weapons each, and further declines are expected. A comprehensive test ban is imminent. The labs' have stopped designing nuclear weapons and are converting to civilian and environmental research. The nuclear weapons budget is dropping, and the labs' weapons work force is shrinking.

Dream on.

Yes, the Cold War is over. But none of the rest is true. And the nuclear mafia that profited from the Cold War protection racket is actually growing, untouched by the budget battles that threaten just about everything else in government. And, with your silent permission, the nuclear gang is moving its operations more and more to a mesa near you.

We can be grateful that older weapons are being dismantled. But disarmament it ain't. Even if START II is ratified in Russia — which is doubtful right now, due in large part to U.S. violations of the 1973 ABM Treaty — the U.S. expects to keep roughly 8,500 nuclear bombs and warheads, about half ready to use and half in "reserve." Without START II, this number will be higher.

What's worse, some senators (with bomb plants in their states) have recently begun to modernize the arsenal with new kinds of warheads.

A test ban? That's another myth. Far from having stopped their pursuits, the nuclear labs continue to develop new weapon concepts. Like the High-Powered Radio Frequency weapon, designed to use Earth's atmosphere as a powerful radio antenna in order to cripple a nation or an army by knocking out its electrical circuits at one stroke. Will it be deployed? The new Earth-Penetrator will. It's made to break hardened bunkers with a powerful nuclear-explosive shock to the earth.

Declining weapons budgets? Don't we wish! Far from declining, the bomb-builders' budget line is now rising for the second year in a row. Although weapons spending at the labs is less than it was at the peak of Reagan's apocalyptic push toward Armageddon, it is still twice, in constant dollars, what it was in 1975. According to the Brookings Institution, U.S. taxpayers have coughed up some $4 trillion for nuclear arms.

But these first 50 years are just the beginning, according to the Department of Energy. That agency is about to embark on a multibillion-dollar long-term nuclear spending spree, centered around new "surrogate" testing devices at the labs. These machines are not necessary to maintain existing weapons. They are designed to provide the capability to design and certify new nuclear weapons, test ban or no. Politically, they are part of a pork-barrel payoff to the labs and their powerful protectors in return for support of a test ban.

One of these machines is the redundant and ill-advised DARHT (Dual Axis Radiographic Hydrodynamic Test) facility at Los Alamos. Oinking in at $187 million, it soon will be pushed from the trough just a few years after it is finally finished by a successor machine costing 340 percent more. DARHT will explode mock warheads — some made of real plutonium, using what everyone hopes will be leakproof steel tanks.

However unlikely it may be, an accidental explosion with plutonium would be catastrophic for New Mexico, with fallout that would drift miles downwind. DOE's own analysis shows that serious radiation doses could be imparted to downwind communities in this scenario, causing fatal cancers and — they forgot to say this part — permanently contaminating many square miles of land. Even a small leak would be very serious.

Given its enormous (and almost eternal) toxicity and its potentially holocaustal role in the center of each nuclear weapon, plutonium has been aptly called "matter as darkness." Nonetheless, Los Alamos has generously offered to be the nation's plutonium processing capital, taking over the grim and dirty work of making nuclear weapons cores from the now-closed Rocky Flats plant in Colorado. More than $550 million is about to be invested in upgrading its plutonium capabilities.

In the real world, that kind of money would signal serious long-term job creation. But DOE officials make clear that few or no new jobs are to be expected from this work.

What's going on here? It's what is euphemistically called "science-based stockpile stewardship." DOE's Assistant Secretary Victor Reis explains: "The stewards really are more important than the equipment. ... The purpose of the stockpile stewardship program is in fact to maintain the stewards, and the right type of experiments." Ah yes, of course. In the final analysis, stockpile stewardship is not about scientists maintaining warheads; it's about warheads maintaining scientists.

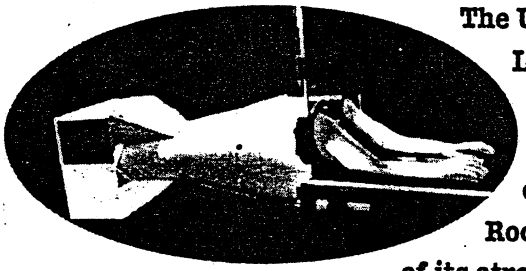
The future of the nuclear weapons complex, including Los Alamos, is the subject of a DOE hearing on Thursday at the Double-Tree Hotel (formerly the High Mesa Inn), 3347 Cerrillos Road, from 2 to 5 p.m. and 6 to 9:30 p.m. Why not come? And bring the kids. They're the ones who seem to have been left out of DOE's equation.

Greg Mello is director of the Los Alamos Study Group.

The original of this was 135% larger written by a local businessman it appeared just before the SSFM PEIS hearings in 2 papers. LASG tutored the author, helped gather sponsors, and served as a financial bucker for the ad.

April 24-30, 1996

Do You Know that Los Alamos National Laboratory will soon become the nation's only nuclear weapon plutonium facility?



Glove box for handling plutonium & the first nuclear bomb 'Little Boy'

The US Department of Energy (DOE) is planning to make Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) the nation's only facility for manufacturing plutonium weapons parts—the so-called "pits" that form the grim core of each warhead. This is the work formerly done at the Rocky Flats plant near Denver, forced to close because of its atrocious environmental, health and safety record.

Let Your Voice Be Heard ▪ Silence = Indifference

WHAT: The Last Public Department of Energy Hearing on the Future of Nuclear Weapons Design, Testing & Production and its Impacts on Los Alamos National Laboratory

WHEN: April 25, 1996 2–5 PM • 6–9:30 PM

WHERE: The Double Tree Hotel (formerly the High Mesa Inn) 3347 Cerrillos Road, Santa Fe, NM

HOW: Join As a Community to Protect Our Safety and Quality of Life

WHY: Health Risks • Potential Accidents & Contamination • Loss of Tourism • Lowered Real Estate Values • More Nuclear Waste • Loss of Control Over Our Futures

SPEAK OUT FOR:

- Ending new nuclear weapons design and production;
- Eliminating the transport of nuclear materials and waste transport through our communities;
- Stopping nuclear waste dump expansion on the Pajarito Plateau;
- Redirecting LANL's resources toward leadership in civilian science and technologies, including alternative energy, medicine, environmental science, and treaty verification technologies;
- No mock nuclear plutonium explosions at DARHT
- Complete clean up of LANL's contamination of ancestral lands;
- Expanding funds for technologies for radioactive waste management locally and globally;
- Breaking the silence that supports and enables the nuclear circle of violence and intimidation; and
- Exposing the deception perpetuated by the nuclear industry under the umbrella of national security.

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For additional information about this meeting, the issues or to make donations to support this ad, please call:
Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety at 986•1973 or The Los Alamos Study Group at 982•7747

Paper: Santa Fe New Mexican, The (NM)
Title: Radioactive mishaps rising at LANL
Date: July 29, 1996

Mishaps in which workers or equipment have been contaminated with radioactive substances are on the rise at Los Alamos National Laboratory, according to a laboratory report obtained by The New Mexican.

From 1993 to 1995, the number of documented incidents of radioactive contamination across the laboratory rose 22 percent, a July 12 study called a ``Summary of Radiological Incident Reports'' says.

Additionally, the number of reports of contaminations at the lab's plutonium facility Technical Area 55 jumped 75 percent between 1993 and 1995, from 139 to 244, the report says.

A second laboratory report says the total amount of radiation that the entire laboratory work force was exposed to in 1995 was higher than in any other year this decade save 1990.

The 1995 ``collective dose'' was 43 percent greater than the target level for 1995 to which the lab committed itself when the existing management contract with the University of California was drawn up earlier this decade, according to a 29-page annual report put out by the lab's ``dose optimization team.''

Lab officials say the rise in radiation exposure and radioactive mishaps since 1993 has one primary cause: the Cassini project, an ongoing effort to build radioactive heat sources for deep space probes used by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

The space probes are fueled by an isotope of plutonium that is particularly difficult to handle: Plutonium-238, which is many times more radioactive than the better known Plutonium-239 used in nuclear bombs.

Lab spokesman Jim Danneskiold said the Cassini project has peaked and that therefore it is likely that contamination incidents at the lab should decrease in the near future.

A secondary factor in the increased contamination rates could be improved monitoring of radiation incidents at the lab and the lowering of the Energy Department's threshold for which some types of radioactive contamination incidents must be reported.

``In a sense, I'm happy to see (the increases) because it indicates we're doing a better job of tracking and reporting'' incidents, said Joseph Graf, an official with the lab's Environmental, Safety and Health Division.

The two reports on radiological contamination come at a time of heightened concern about safety practices at the lab. Four fatal or near fatal accidents in the past 19 months contributed to lab director Sig Hecker's decision two weeks ago to temporarily halt all laboratory operations so that management and employees could review safety procedures.

That suspension of work, which for the most part has been lifted, came on the heels of a Department of Energy study that castigated laboratory management for ``an inability to learn from previous incidents to prevent their recurrence.'' The 156-page DOE study resulted from a DOE investigation of an electrical accident in January that left a laboratory worker in a coma.

Hecker, at a news conference announcing the work suspension, pointed out that the four accidents occurred in work projects that did not involve radioactive materials. Both Hecker and Bruce Matthews, director of the Nuclear Materials Technology Division, have said over the past several months that while the lab needs to improve in the field of industrial safety, its safety procedures at facilities that handle nuclear materials are excellent.

Not everyone has been in agreement about that.

The Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board, a government agency that performs technical oversight of DOE nuclear weapons facilities, said in 1994 that the radiation protection program at Technical Area 55 was only ``marginally satisfactory and in need of improvement.''

Danneskiold said the board gave TA-55 a much better rating last year.

Graf said the upward trend is driven primarily by two types of contamination: area contaminations and

contamination of workers' clothing.

Area contaminations include spills of radioactive materials. At TA-55, area contaminations more than doubled between 1993 and 1995 from 45 to 109 incidents.

Additionally, contamination of workers' protective clothing at TA-55 jumped 76 percent between 1993 and 1995 from 98 incidents to 173 incidents.

Graf said other types of radioactive contamination have been decreasing.

He noted that contamination of workers' nasal passages with plutonium a serious situation since uptake in the nostrils could lead to the deposition of plutonium in the lungs, where it could be deadly dropped from 11 incidents in 1993 to eight incidents last year.

There were six such incidents during the first six months of this year, however, a rate slightly ahead of the 1993 rate.

Graf also pointed out that skin contaminations at the lab dropped from 51 in 1994 to 40 in 1995.

Once again, however, the rate appears to be higher in 1996.

Over the first six months of this year, there were 29 skin contamination incidents. If that rate is maintained, it would result in more contaminations in 1996 than in 1994.

While the total number of documented contamination incidents over the first six months of this year is lagging significantly behind last year's rate, the number of more serious but not necessarily dangerous contamination incidents at TA-55 appears to be on the rise in 1996.

Through June 30 at TA-55, there were 27 such incidents described in documents called occurrence reports. That's more than took place in all of 1994 at TA-55 and is only seven less than the 34 occurrence reports issued due to mishaps at TA-55 in 1993 and 1995.

A Santa Fe activist agreed that the main reason for the increases probably is the handling of plutonium-238 necessitated by the Cassini project.

But he said a more fundamental problem is that plutonium no matter what the isotope is an inherently dangerous substance to work with.

``There is every indication that increased work with plutonium will cause increases in worker exposures and an increased danger of more widespread accidents,'' Greg Mello of the **Los Alamos Study Group** said.

While the Cassini project may be fading, the lab will take on increased plutonium responsibilities in coming years. The Department of Energy's new ``stockpile stewardship'' program calls upon the lab to build 20 to 80 plutonium pits per year beginning early next century.

Plutonium pits, grapefruit-size metal spheres, are found at the heart of nuclear bombs.

Pit manufacturing at the DOE's Rocky Flats plant near Denver led to widespread contamination of facilities, equipment, workers and the environment. Activists like Mello have raised concerns that production work at LANL will lead to similar problems. Laboratory officials dismiss that claim, saying that the scale of production planned at Los Alamos pales in comparison to the production levels at Rocky Flats which were on the order of 1,000 pits per year during the Cold War era.

Author: KEITH EASTHOUSE
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Publication: Jnl Legacy 1995 to July 2005; Date: Nov 13, 1996; Section: Journal North; Page: 57

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DOE Report Confirms LANL To Make Pits

Ian Hoffman Journal Staff Writer

Scientists at Los Alamos National Laboratory gladly ceded the lab's mantle as the nation's nuclear-weapons factory 42 years ago.

Now a key element of that role is coming back to the birthplace of the bomb for as long as the federal government foresees.

A report issued Tuesday affirmed the U.S. Department of Energy's choice of Los Alamos as the nation's only site for making plutonium pits for the U.S. stockpile.

The DOE report also recommended LANL as home to a $43 million machine, called Atlas, that nearly recreates the pressures and temperatures within an exploding nuclear weapon to study mock-ups of bomb components.

Making the grapefruit-sized pits at Los Alamos for 25 years will cost $1.9 billion. Anti-nuclear activists argue it also could undermine international gains in arms reduction.

Weapons scientists have differed over whether pits in the stockpile need to be replaced. Proponents suggest that decay of the old pits will cause a buildup of hydrogen and highly radioactive americium.

"They like to create this doomsday scenario of 'What if it all turned into peanut butter?' But there's no evidence it's happening," said Dr. Dan Kerlinsky of Albuquerque, a member of Physicians for Social Responsibility and a former member of a government panel that studied the DOE weapons complex.

"The main problem with the (study) is they're trying to hold in place a static notion of what the nuclear world is right now, rather than what it's going to become over the next 10 or 20 years," Kerlinsky said.

Locally, some wonder about the impact on the region's quality of life. Until 1989, the DOE made pits at Rocky Flats; it was closed in 1992 due to safety problems and massive contamination.

"We don't want what happened at Rocky Flats to happen at Los Alamos," said H.L. Daneman, a retired engineer in Santa Fe. Daneman said he worries about accidents or terrorist attacks at Los Alamos.

"Nobody wants to live by Love Canal or Three Mile Island. I would not like to see the communities around Los Alamos become stigmatized," he said.

Lab officials point out that Los Alamos always has produced plutonium pits -- for explosive tests and for predicting the effects of aging on nuclear weapons. Now, it will produce pits primarily for warheads in submarine-launched Trident missiles and in the land-based Minuteman III missile.

Under the new program, lab officials predict they will make 20 or fewer pits a year, starting in 2003 or 2004. The lab is spending at least $115 million on renovating Technical Area 55, its plutonium facility, to handle production of up to 50 pits a year working single shifts, or 80 pits a year if technicians work around the clock.

The Atlas facility requires about 15 workers. To make 20 pits a year, the lab will need to hire 90 workers, including 40 to make the pits in glove boxes and 50 for such supporting jobs as security and radiation control, said Jim Danneskiold, a lab spokesman.

If the lab makes 50 pits a year, it will need about 155 new workers, he said.

The new program bears no comparison with Rocky Flats, where thousands of pits were produced each year, Danneskiold said.

"There were some things that were done at Rocky Flats that were just unacceptable," Danneskiold said.

The lab is developing new processes to cut down on radioactive waste and radiation exposure for workers, such as casting the pits and cleaning them without using hazardous solvents, Danneskiold said.

The Atlas facility would use an energy burst equal for an instant to the world's electrical output to compress foils and metals as large as 4 inches into the size of a checker.

Atlas, slated to start operating by 1999, is among a slew of tools that nuclear scientists say they need to see what happens within an aging nuclear weapon since they no longer can use explosive tests. Anti-nuclear activists contend that such multimillion dollar machines amount to no more than "nuclear welfare" to succor the weapons scientists whose heyday ended with the Cold War.

"The reason the labs have all this money thrown at them for dozens of duplicative new facilities is that they're cooperating in obtaining a comprehensive test ban," said Greg Mello, head of the Santa Fe-based Los Alamos Study Group. "This is a political deal. It has nothing to do with science and everything to do with a political payoff."

Mello's group is among some 40 environmental organizations that have vowed to sue to stop the stockpile stewardship and management program. They are expected to argue that the DOE failed to consider other plans seriously, especially ones that envision further arms reductions.

Steve Guidice, a DOE manager working on the stockpile stewardship and management program, said the department focused on plans that fit U.S. national security policy and were technologically feasible.

"People can suggest a lot of things, but if they're out of context with those two things, they're not really applicable. Denuclearization, for example, is not a reasonable alternative," Guidice said during a teleconference Tuesday with reporters.

The DOE believes that the program will enable it to certify to the president that the weapons stockpile is reliable, said Vic Reis, the department's assistant secretary for defense programs.

"We think we can do the job. But we can return to testing if need be and return to production if need be," Reis said.