

# Los Alamos Study Group

## Information and Action Alert

May 28, 1996

## Los Alamos Creating New Nuclear Weapons Testing Capability

### New "Hydrotesting" Facility Using Plutonium Will Give U.S. Unprecedented Ability To Design Fission Weapons

**Background:** A story today in a New Mexico newspaper (attached) discusses plans of the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) to test nuclear warheads in Los Alamos using a special isotope of plutonium. The use of this isotope would allow unprecedented diagnostic accuracy during the design process and give unprecedented design confidence, short of a nuclear explosive test. The tests would be conducted at the \$187 million "Dual-Axis Radiographic Hydrotest Facility" (DARHT) now under construction in Los Alamos. DARHT will give weapons designers more precise information about implosion than has ever been available before, including X-ray pictures from taken from two directions and at high resolution.

Today's Albuquerque Journal story, written by reporter John Fleck, focuses on the use of the scarce isotope Pu-242, which has a critical mass ten times as great as the Pu-239 normally used in weapons. Exact copies of existing or proposed new kinds of nuclear weapons could thus made of Pu-242 and detonated without fear of a nuclear explosion. The use of Pu-242 would assure that the implosion of the mock weapon would exactly mimic a real weapon.

The U.S. is about to increase its stock of Pu-242 by processing Pu-242 solutions now being held at the Savannah River Site, in preparation for the planned testing program at DARHT.

The planned use of Pu-242 in a weapons configuration is being kept classified within the DOE, not by the weapons program but by the DOE's nonproliferation officials, according to Fleck.

The planned tests are part of DOE's controversial "stockpile stewardship" program, involving the construction of billions of dollars in new facilities and an increase in nuclear weapons spending. In real dollars, those budgets are now more than twice their 1975 level. The planned tests would be in addition to the underground "subcritical" experiments with plutonium DOE plans for the Nevada Test Site.

**Action:** The DOE should initiate a public review of the purpose and supposed need for all aspects of its "stewardship" program. In the meantime, both the planned plutonium-242 hydrotests at DARHT and the "subcritical" experiments in Nevada should be canceled, and construction of DARHT halted pending review. None of these tests are necessary to maintain the safety and reliability of the U.S. arsenal. They instead reflect the intent of the U.S. nuclear weapons establishment to continue weapons design and undercut the effect of a test ban treaty. This, together with the planned deployment of new and upgraded weapons, must be stopped.

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