

The Future of Nuclear Weapons: Changing Faster Than We Think? Decisions Made This Month or Next May Have Long-term Effects

Background Briefing for Selected Members of the Press

TOMORROW, 10/21/05, at Cloud Cliff Café, 2:30 to 4:30 pm

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- Senator Domenici's Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittee seeks to slash funds for nuclear disarmament by more than half. Republicans leading the corresponding House of Representatives committee seek to triple them, calling for a "dramatically smaller nuclear stockpile in the near future."
- Senator Domenici's committee wants a billion-dollar new plutonium facility at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), something LANL has been trying to build off and on since at least 1988. Domenici would plus up the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) request of \$55 million for this year by \$10 million, while the House would halt the project, at least for now, calling it "premature."
- The House wants dramatically smaller science programs at the national labs and slower upgrades for nuclear weapons. The Senate wants business as usual.
- The House wants significantly better security at NNSA sites, and fewer sites; the Senate stands pat on these questions.
- The House wants a 7% lower budget this year; the Senate stands roughly pat. This is a fairly big spread.
- The House recommendations are seconded in some respects by the Secretary of Energy's Advisory Board (SEAB), which has issued a report listing hundreds of millions of dollars in redundancies in the weapons complex as well reserving its most scathing comments for operations at the LANL plutonium facility, which are also being criticized on the basis of safety (next bullet).
- The Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (DNFSB) is trying to upgrade not just the safety of the LANL plutonium facility but also the planned level of safety at the new billion-dollar building, saying that the current operational and design philosophy at TA-55 and elsewhere is a step down from the relative rigor of the past and may offer limited consequence mitigation in the event of an accident. Thus the design of the proposed new facility, as well as the funding, appears to be in limbo as of this writing.
- The House and Senate also differ on the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP; the House doesn't want it), the level of services to provided to the existing stockpile (much of which the House does not want to maintain much longer), the level of "science" and "engineering" funding in the weapons program as well as advanced computing and W88 (Trident II) pit manufacture (the House wants about 30% less money in each of these programs), and the proposed large-scale pit factory, which the House does not want to fund.
- These decisions are taking place against a backdrop of concern about the U.S. nuclear weapons program by much of the world, while the U.S., for its part, seeks to focus attention on Iran and North Korea.

These programs comprise much of the "leading edge" of nuclear weapons policy in the United States, but there has been very little press coverage of them. Much of the program remains obscure, despite overt and latent scandals. Funding issues must be resolved by November 18 under the current continuing resolution, and New Mexico's senior senator is a major actor. "I'd be happy to answer questions both about policy and the programs being reviewed. Much is now on the table, more than at any time since 1995," said Greg Mello, Study Group director.

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