

Nuclear welfare for LANL increases global dangers – and hurts New Mexico

LANL's recent expansion, driven by nuclear war-fighting theories and pork barrel politics, may not last – and shouldn't. A smaller lab would be better.

Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) is the best-funded nuclear weapons facility in the world – and the single biggest recipient of federal funds in New Mexico. What it does is shrouded in myth and mystery, for most people. It is certainly a place of many secrets, a place of “no public memory,” in the apt 1993 phrase of Herman Agoyo, Ohkay Owingeh elder. Engineered narratives and wishful thinking fill the resulting void. This has serious consequences for the state.

LANL is by far the biggest private employer in northern New Mexico, and the biggest dog in its politics. Yet what LANL spends is not the only thing that counts. What LANL is, and what it does, matter massively for the future of the region and the state.

What LANL does cannot even be openly discussed. What it makes cannot be sold or bought. LANL produces no civilian goods or services and provides no true public meaning. As a result, economic development has never occurred and never will.

As former Pentagon economist William Weida put it, “for there to be economic development in northern New Mexico, people must first realize that ‘The Bomb’ was a mistake.”

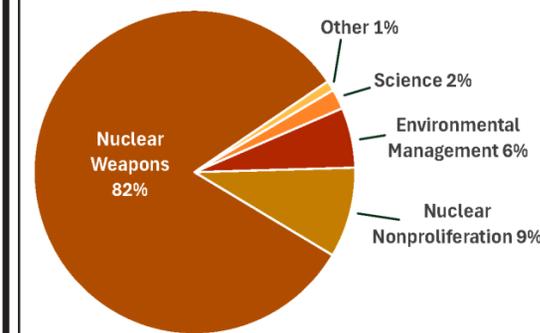
Many people think LANL does a lot of “science” (not otherwise specified) and therefore must be a good place to work on technical solutions to a wide range of challenges and incipient emergencies,

from pandemics to climate change. None of this is true. This powerful misconception cripples our economic and political thought.

LANL is a nuclear weapons laboratory and would-be nuclear production plant that also does other military-related work. It also does a *sliver* of work less directly linked to “national security.” While so-called “science” pervades most of LANL's work, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), which owns and funds LANL, classifies less than 3% of LANL's work as “science” per se, as the chart above shows.

Just 21% -- one in five -- of LANL employees are “scientists” (of any stripe), according to NNSA. From the same source, some 44% of LANL employees are administrators or in management. As a result, by late 2023 the cost to taxpayers of putting one scientist to work for a year at LANL exceeded \$2 million. Everything at LANL is very costly, from its specialized infrastructure to its security, to the six- and seven-figure salaries and bonuses for executives, to the hotel stays necessary for many construction workers.

What does LANL do? (Source: NNSA, 2023)



This and prior SFR ads can be seen, shared, and downloaded at <https://lasg.org/LASG-ads.html>

Astronomical costs ensure that LANL will always be a nuclear bomb facility and little else. New Mexico's politicians have always justified their nuclear fealty by the promise of “economic development.” That has never worked out. As LANL's spending has grown, New Mexico's relative economic and social performance has fallen. Since 2019, New Mexico has been dead last among the states in overall child well-being in 5 out of 6 years, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Overall, New Mexico was recently rated the “worst state to live in” by WalletHub. We have gathered many such statistics at <https://lasg.org/NMRankings2.pdf>. They will shock you.

The clearest data on LANL's failure as an economic development engine comes from Rio Arriba County; see https://lasg.org/RioArriba-note_16May2025.html. Bill Weida again: “Those who think LANL creates economic development are people for whom 60 [now 80] years of data are not enough.”

This discussion would not be complete without at least mentioning the enormous impacts of LANL's recent growth on regional housing markets and traffic congestion, which will have to be the subject of a future ad in this series.

LANL doesn't develop the region. The region, through its intelligence, skills, and labor, develops LANL. For politicians, LANL is “political heroin” (Carol Miller). The leaders of both major parties make sure nobody can be elected who is not willing to be an addict. Unfortunately, those same leaders are trying to get us hooked on an even deadlier drug – plutonium.

“For there to be economic development in northern New Mexico, people must first realize that ‘The Bomb’ was a mistake.”
Dr. William Weida

The Acme Plutonium Factory on “The Hill” – how long will this caper last?

LANL's “big new thing” is its quest to build a factory complex for plutonium warhead cores (“pits”). This was the mission of the former Rocky Flats Plant. Previous ads in this series (see the link in the box above) have discussed how in 2018, the New Mexico congressional delegation joined forces with (other) nuclear hawks to overturn a 2017 decision by NNSA to NOT use LANL's old, crowded plutonium facility for a permanent pit factory.

NNSA's 2017 analysis favored remodeling an unfinished, new-but-never-used plutonium building in South Carolina into a pit factory. LANL was to be used only for small-scale, temporary production. In 2018, a very different decision was made to instead build two permanent pit factories. This ensured that billions of dollars in otherwise unnecessary expenses would flow to LANL, pleasing the New Mexico delegation. A shiny “Plutopia” seemed just around the corner, one that would harmoniously blend traditional folkways with manufacturing cores for weapons of mass destruction. That was never going to fly.

Trying to build two hyper-expensive factories with the same mission at the same time, drawing on the same

tiny supply chain for critical equipment, was also “unique” in the modern history of the U.S. nuclear warhead complex. The decision to do so was made without a single supporting study, and has since turned into a fiscal nightmare.

What the nuclear hawks mostly wanted was a way to quickly produce more ICBM warheads. The 532 or so modern (W87-1) ICBM warheads available, *plus* another 400 (W78) ICBM warheads currently deployed, *plus* thousands of submarine-launched warheads, *plus* nuclear bombs and nuclear-tipped cruise missiles, weren't enough to “win” the nuclear war-fighting scenarios they were fed.

Other states' pork-barrel interests were also involved. In particular Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) in California needed a new warhead to work on. If LANL would just do the dirty work of making the pits, LLNL could do the clean work of designing the warhead. Thanks to Tom Udall, Martin Heinrich, Michelle Lujan Grisham, and Ben Ray Lujan, plutonium has become the centerpiece of northern New Mexico “economic development.” For now.

Since that 2018 decision LANL's budget has roughly doubled, as the graph to the left illustrates. There is every indication LANL's costs will continue to rise. LANL now spends more than four times as much as it did on average during the Cold War, after correcting for inflation. Most of the increase is for pits.

But so far LANL has produced just one (1) pit, against a requirement of 30 by 9/30/25. Perhaps LANL will pull dozens of pits out of a hat soon, but don't bet on it. If LANL were a civilian business rather than a nuclear weapons welfare project, it would already be bankrupt.

As a result of cost overruns at LANL and the Savannah River Site, the cost of acquiring pit production capability now likely exceeds \$50 billion, five times the currently estimated cost of NNSA's next-largest project, the Uranium Processing Facility in Tennessee. For how long can this madness be sustained?



Above: Study Group panel presentation at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, Nov 13, 2024. Here we see Greg debating pit production with NNSA Administrator Jill Hruby; GAO's Allison Bawden, Director, Natural Resources & Environment; Robert Peters, Heritage Foundation Senior Fellow; and moderator Dan Leone, Editor, Exchange Monitor Publications. A video of the exchange is on our YouTube channel.

There is more. LANL's pit factory will be 56 years old when it is “finished,” if that ever happens. Operating costs for the required round-the-clock work at LANL will then be at least twice those of the single-shift facility in SC, for less than half as many pits.

So for how long will NNSA continue with its LANL pit production “experiment?” That depends, in part, on what each of us does.

LET'S WORK TOGETHER TO STOP NUCLEAR WEAPONS

We seldom ask for financial support. NOW is the time of year in which we must do so! We are excited about what we can do next year. Naturally, much of what we want to do costs money.

Since 1989 the Los Alamos Study Group community – our staff and board, volunteers, interns, and supporters – has consistently provided leadership on nuclear weapons issues in New Mexico, nationally, and in past decades, internationally. Our work includes research, scholarship, and writing, education and lobbying of nuclear decision makers in Washington, providing an information clearinghouse for journalists, local organizing, litigating, and advertising. To the extent funding allows, we are not just a “think tank” but also an “action tank.”

We have a long history of successes in defeating, delaying, and legally constraining nuclear weapons projects including plutonium pit production, running back to the early 1990s. In the present era, we see informed, principled, local resistance as more important than ever.

The Study Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. All donations are fully tax-deductible. We are entirely non-partisan. Candid (formerly Guidestar) has given us its highest “Platinum” rating for transparency; our tax filings are posted there.

Examples of what more resources could fund include: More ads (such as this one), drive-time radio spots, billboards, and targeted mailings; Local organizing and national outreach help, augmented by visiting activists and students; paid internships; and additional staff.

Other aspects of our work will continue, but as you will already understand, these are no longer “normal” times – or rather, the “new normal” is all-too-rapidly becoming one of growing instability and war. More than ever we need, as Einstein said, “active participation in the fight against war and everything that leads to it.”

That “we” is not somebody else. It's each of us. When we participate in the fight against war and nuclear weapons, something fresh and new is born. We change. We leave behind the war culture, which has used our passivity as permission. We join a community of resistance and renewal.

We in New Mexico have a uniquely powerful location at the center of the U.S. nuclear warhead complex. In the fight against nuclear weapons and war, we have the privilege – and the responsibility – of proximity. Let's use it!

There are many ways to contribute. You can mail a check (our address is below) or securely contribute on-line at <https://lasg.org/contribute.htm>, where you can also see other ways to give. Thank you!



Los Alamos Study Group
2901 Summit Place NE
Albuquerque, NM 87106



Scan this QR code and endorse the Call for Sanity, Not Nuclear Production!

Thank you for your support! It really makes a difference!