nuclear watch new mexico

Talking Points on Plutonium Pit Production at LANL: Presentation to the Radioactive and Hazardous Materials Committee

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Background: New Mexico as America's Nuclear Colony

- Department of Energy's FY 2024 budget in New Mexico was $10 billion (double next state).
  - 75% core nuclear weapons research and production programs
    - $1.75 billion expanded plutonium "pit" bomb core production
  - $464.3 million for dumping plutonium wastes at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant
- New Mexico's entire FY 2024 state operating budget was 6% less ($9.4 billion).
- Los Alamos County is 70.6% non-Hispanic White, 11th richest county in US, has most millionaires per capita. NM is minority majority (50% Hispanic, 11.2% Native American).
- Los Alamos County receives >$25 million in annual state gross receipts taxes on LANL.
- Six surrounding county governments suffer net economic loss from the Lab's presence.
- Trinity Test Downwinders have yet to be compensated.
- Nuclear Regulatory Commission has approved permit to dump all high level wastes in NM.
- Expanding nuclear weapons programs sold as jobs, jobs, jobs.
- Nevertheless, New Mexico is the 4th poorest state, dead last in public education, and per capita income has fallen from 32nd in 1959 to 47th in 2022. **The question needs to be asked, what good does expanding nuclear weapons programs really do for the average New Mexican?**

For more, see https://nukewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/New-Mexico-Americas-Nuclear-Colony.pdf

Why Expanded Plutonium Pit Production is Unnecessary

- The Los Alamos Lab has been authorized since December 1996 to produce 20 pits per year.
- The National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) is aggressively moving to produce at least 30 pits per year at LANL and 50 pits per year at the Savannah River Site (SRS) in SC.
- Take home point: No future plutonium pit production is to maintain the safety and reliability of the existing nuclear weapons stockpile. Instead, it is all for speculative new design nuclear weapons.
- Independent scientists (the "JASONs") concluded in 2006 that pits last at least a century (average age now is around 42). In 2012 the Livermore Lab concluded that plutonium is "aging gracefully."
- NNSA has avoided new pit aging studies since then. Congress required a plan for new pit aging results by 2030 but the horse is way out of the barn by then.
- There are at least 15,000 existing pits stored at the Pantex Plant near Amarillo, TX.

Why Expanded Plutonium Pit Production Is Actually Harmful

- Substantial plutonium contamination has spread in surface water as far as Cochiti Lake and is migrating vertically toward groundwater. High readings in Acid Canyon.
- Pit production is exorbitantly expensive, >$60 billion over 30 years at LANL and SRS.
- Pit production at LANL and SRS will add 57,500 cubic meters of transuranic wastes.
- Existing pit designs are being changed. This could degrade national security by introducing uncertainties into the extensively tested, proven nuclear weapons stockpile.
- Alternatively, it could damage national security by prompting the U.S. to resume testing, which would have grave international proliferation consequences.
- Unnecessary U.S. pit production for new-design nuclear weapons helps to fuel today's escalating nuclear arms race. This new arms race is arguably more dangerous and unpredictable than the first arms race because of multiple nuclear actors and new cyber threats, hypersonic weapons and artificial intelligence.

Programmatic Problems with Pit Production

- DOE has been on the Government Accountability Office's High Risk List since 1991.
- GAO January 2023 report: NNSA has no credible cost estimates and no Integrated Master Schedule for expanded plutonium pit production, its most expensive and complex program ever.
- GAO August 2023 report: the cost to complete all five plutonium pit production projects at LANL could increase 30-40 percent (up to $5.5 billion) and delayed 2 to 4 years to Sept. 2032.
- Pit production at the Savannah River Site is already delayed to at least 2036 and has more than doubled in estimated construction costs to $11 billion.
- The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires a new nation-wide programmatic environmental impact statement (PEIS) when there is new significant information and changed circumstances. NNSA's last PEIS in 2008 did not consider simultaneous production at two sites.
- On September 30, 2024 a federal judge in South Carolina ruled that NNSA was in violation of NEPA (NukeWatch is a co-plaintiff in that lawsuit). The opposing parties must submit a joint proposal for appropriate remedies by December 12.
- NNSA published a Notice of Intent for a new LANL Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement (SWEIS) in August 2022. The NNSA still hasn't released a draft SWEIS despite a clear statutory requirement that EISs must be completed within two years.
- NEPA public comments tangibly benefit the Lab and the public. Witness the 1999 LANL SWEIS whose analysis of wildfire risks proved crucial for the 2000 Cerro Grande Fire.

The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant

- A senior NNSA official has described WIPP as the "Achilles heel" of pit production. WIPP is already oversubscribed for the future plutonium wastes that DOE wants to dump there.
- WIPP's mission is fundamentally changing from supporting DOE "cleanup" (as poor as it is) to direct support of NNSA's expanding pit production for new nuclear weapons designs.
- By 2036 plutonium pit wastes dumped at WIPP will far exceed cleanup wastes. DOE plans to use WIPP for disposing of nuclear weapons production wastes until at least 2050.

Some Basic LANL Cleanup Facts

- New Mexico's long-term future lies with protecting water resources, not pit production. As late as the late 1990's, LANL claimed that groundwater contamination was impossible.
- In contrast, a 2005 Lab report: "Future contamination at additional locations is expected over a period of decades to centuries as more of the contaminant inventory reaches the water table."
- The Lab's nuclear weapons budget has doubled over last decade. Yet cleanup remains flat at 6%.
- Former head of DOE EMLA falsely claimed in public that cleanup was >50% complete.
- GAO July 2023 report: Estimated cost of LANL cleanup explodes to $7 billion from original $2.7 billion and schedule is extended to 2043 from original 2032.

Recommendations for the Radioactive and Hazardous Materials Committee

- New Mexico's WIPP permit should be vigorously supported. It requires permit renewal every 10 years, prioritization of LANL legacy wastes (not new plutonium pit wastes) and an annual DOE report on its efforts (or not) for an out-of-state WIPP replacement.
- NMED should rigorously enforce hazardous waste provisions with respect to pit production.
- The jury is still out on the effectiveness of the new "Consent Order" governing LANL cleanup. The RHMC should monitor that Consent Order "campaigns" are truly meaningful.
- Chromium contaminants should be flushed out at their source with treated groundwater.
- LANL plans to "cap and cover" radioactive/toxic waste dumps, leaving them permanently buried as a perpetual threat to groundwater, should be rejected.
- In contrast, RHMC should support NMED's draft order mandating full cleanup of Area C.
- NMED should compel comprehensive cleanup at LANL. That would be a win-win for New Mexicans, permanently protecting water resources while providing decades of high-paying jobs.

Sources: NNSA Congressional Budget Request (CBR), 2006 JASON Pit Life Study, GAO reports, LANL Intellus database, U.S. Census Bureau, UNM Bureau of Business and Economic Research, LANL's Hydrogeological Studies of the Parajito Plateau (1998-2004), 2016 LANL Cleanup Life Cycle Cost, 2020 National Academy of Sciences WIPP study. November 15, 2024