- back to story page

URL: http://www.abqjournal.com/north/406206north_news11-09-05.htm

Wednesday, November 9, 2005

Lab Expected to Get New Plutonium Unit

By John Arnold and John Fleck
Journal Staff Writers

A project to replace one of Los Alamos National Laboratory's largest and oldest buildings— an aging nuclear research facility with a history of safety problems— would receive its largest chunk of funding to date under a new Department of Energy spending plan.

A $30.5 billion Energy and Water Appropriations bill hammered out by House and Senate negotiators Monday includes $55 million for construction of a new Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Facility.

The existing 550,000-square-foot building, located in the lab's Technical Area-3, dates back to the early 1950s and is used to test and analyze plutonium and other nuclear materials. But safety problems, including a 1996 explosion, have plagued the facility over the last decade, and lab officials say it's been expensive to upgrade and maintain.

Lab spokesman Kevin Roark said the new building will be more efficient, more secure and much smaller— about half the size of the current building.

"Really, the driver (for the new facility) was we don't need as much space. We need a facility that's cheaper to maintain, and we need a facility that's located inside an existing security perimeter," Roark said.

The new facility, to be located with other plutonium facilities in Technical Area-55, will cost an estimated $838 million, according to Sen. Pete Domenici's office. In addition to this year's pending appropriation, Domenici, R-N.M., helped secure $40 million for the project last year and $10 million the previous year.

The project is moving forward over objections from lab watchdogs, who contend the new building is not needed and that it's part of a larger strategy to increase weapons manufacturing at the laboratory.

"We shouldn't build more plutonium space," said Los Alamos Study Group executive director Greg Mello. "The additional floor space is only needed because of the desire to design new weapons, to manufacture new weapons and probably also to do research and development of novel nuclear fuels (for civilian nuclear power). We're opposed to all three of those missions. If you take away those missions you take away the need for the facility."

In addition to CMR facility funding, the DOE spending measure also includes language likely to expand nuclear weapons plutonium manufacturing at Los Alamos.

The lab is currently working on a production line to manufacture small

numbers of plutonium "pits"— the radioactive cores of nuclear weapons. Current plans call for production of 10 such pits per year in 2008. The budget approved by negotiators Monday includes several directives that could expand that work substantially in the future.

The United States has not had a large-scale plutonium factory since the Rocky Flats Plant outside Denver shut down in 1989. Los Alamos has long been seen as an interim manufacturing site while DOE develops plans for a large new factory. But the 2006 budget approved by House and Senate negotiators this week cuts all money for that new factory, while directing the National Nuclear Security Administration "to undertake a review of the pit program to focus on improving the manufacturing capability at TA-55."

Domenici said that the CMR project is not directly tied to pit manufacturing.

"However, as long as the pit manufacturing mission remains at LANL, the more important the (CMR) facility is. It performs the analytical experiments on pits and other special nuclear material," he said in a written statement.

Work will begin on the CMR building's first phase— a radiological laboratory— early next year, Roark said.

The Energy and Water Appropriations Bill, which funds DOE, includes $6.43 billion for nuclear weapons spending. That's a 1.6 percent increase for the coming fiscal year.

The House approved the measure Tuesday. It now requires Senate approval and the president's signature.

E-MAIL Journal Staff Writers John Arnold and John Fleck

Back to story page

FREE New Mexican

Group faults lab on plutonium records

print

By Andy Lenderman The New Mexican |
December 1, 2005

A Maryland nuclear-watchdog group says Los Alamos National Laboratory should do a better job of keeping track of plutonium.

Various organizations involved in monitoring the weapons lab say they believe much of the highly radioactive atomic-bomb ingredient referred to in a new report is buried as waste at Los Alamos.

But authors of a report released Wednesday by the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research want managers of the federal lab to explain what it says are "major discrepancies" in accounts of plutonium at LANL.

One of the report's authors said there's no evidence the plutonium has left Los Alamos.

An official with the National Nuclear Security Administration's Los Alamos office was studying the report Wednesday. But spokesman Bernie Pleau said his office wouldn't be able to respond until today.

The report states: "An analysis of official data indicates that the unaccounted for plutonium amounts to at least 300 kilograms , and could be over 1,000 kilograms, though the higher figure appears unlikely."

Authors Brice Smith and Arjun Makhijani speculate about where the plutonium could be. However, Greg Mello, the head of a separate nuclearwatchdog group in New Mexico called Los Alamos Study Group, said activists have known since the 1970s that most of the plutonium in question is buried in waste at the lab.

Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch New Mexico agreed that's likely. "Nevertheless, we're talking about a very serious discrepancy ," Coghlan said.

The report details discrepancies between documents at the federal Department of Energy headquarters and other DOE offices, Smith and Makhijani wrote.

A summary offers possibilities to explain the discrepancy, including that the plutonium is buried in waste or has been shipped to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad. And if part of the plutonium is missing, they wrote, it would have major national security implications.

"If much or most of the plutonium was disposed of as buried low-level waste and buried transuranic waste, the long-term radiation doses would exceed any allowable limits," the report reads.

The report recommends a detailed explanation of the discrepancy and says appeals to the department and the lab "have failed to elicit a serious response or investigation."

Comments

By Frank Ortiz (Submitted: 12/01/2005 7:32 am)

Gentlemen, when you compare apples and oranges and you try to mix them you don't get orange juice or just apple juice, you get appange!!!

Close | Print

Thursday, December 1, 2005

Plutonium Unaccounted For

By John Arnold
Journal Staff Writer

POJOAQUE— More than 660 pounds of plutonium at Los Alamos National Laboratory is unaccounted for, a Maryland-based environmental watchdog said Tuesday.

The Institute for Energy and Environmental Research compared public records data from the nation's weapons and disposal sites with a 1996 U.S. Department of Energy report detailing plutonium waste inventories. IEER researchers discovered large inventory discrepancies at Los Alamos, said institute president Arjun Makhijani, who co-authored a report on the findings.

"We've got three sets of books with plutonium numbers in waste, and they are so far apart that they cannot be reconciled by any reasonable means," Makhijani said at a news conference in Pojoaque.

Makhijani said his findings raise serious environmental, regulatory and security questions. The amount of unaccounted-for plutonium, a radioactive by-product of nuclear weapons manufacturing, can be used to make dozens of bombs, according to the report. There's no evidence the plutonium has been stolen or has left LANL, Makhijani said, but "it is the responsibility of the Department of Energy and (LANL manager) the University of California to guarantee that it has not gone off site."

It's possible that the unaccounted-for plutonium is buried in nuclear waste pits at LANL, which "would have very significant environmental and health implications," the report states. Another possibility for the discrepancy, according to Makhijani, is that DOE documentation understates the amount of plutonium being disposed of at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad.

A National Nuclear Security Administration representative who attended Tuesday's news conference said the agency would analyze IEER's report and provide a response. John Ordaz, an NNSA assistant manager for environmental stewardship said the analysis would take time.

"But we're doing everything to make sure the public is safe, and everything we do is formal and by the book and we have many, many assessments," Ordaz said.

Makhijani's concerns aren't new. Anti-nuclear activists have raised the issue for years and in 2004 wrote a letter to then-LANL director Pete Nanos asking him to address inventory accounting discrepancies during a work stand-down at the lab.

Greg Mello, director of lab watchdog the Los Alamos Study Group, said he is "comfortable with the assumption" that the unaccounted-for plutonium is buried at LANL, is awaiting shipment to WIPP or has already gone there.

The root of the problem, he said, is poor disposal records, especially related to early disposal areas, that prevent an accurate accounting of plutonium waste.

"The uncertainty we have in (waste records) is more than enough to account for several hundred kilograms," Mello said.

E-MAIL Journal Staff Writer John Arnold

Back to story page

lamonitor.com
The Online News Source for Los Alamos

Friday, January 27, 2006

Headline News

CAB takes lead on public concerns

ROGER SNODGRASS, roger@lamonitor.com, Monitor Assistant Editor

The Northern New Mexican Citizens Advisory Board is becoming the go-to place for environmental issues at Los Alamos National Laboratory.
"You guys have done an amazing amount of work in 2005," said Los Alamos Site Office Manager Ed Wilmott in a presentation to the board Wednesday afternoon, "and the technical quality rivals the lab."

The CAB, as it is known, is one of several Site-Specific Advisory Boards around the country, chartered by the Department of Energy to provide independent advice and recommendations on environmental restoration and waste management issues related to a particular area of concern. Under the chairmanship of Taos environmental engineer J.D. Campbell, the local board has continued and expanded its role as a conduit for public involvement in the northern New Mexico area, adopting and formalizing complex issues, anticipating snags and weaknesses in the system, and identifying key questions for public discussion and education.

Wednesday's meeting included Wilmott's report from DOE, a timely update on the regulatory situation by James Bearzi, the hazardous waste chief at the New Mexico Environment Department and a presentation on a number of groundwater topics at the laboratory.
Last year, the CAB, under former chair Tim DeLong, took up the difficult problem of Area G, the laboratory's low-level waste depository, holding a well-attended information summit on the issue in Santa Fe.

That meeting in May was followed up with detailed reviews, recommendations and presentations and was the subject of several issues addressed by Wilmott Wednesday.
None of the board's 10 recommendations last year have been formally answered by DOE, although Wilmott said some of them had been thought about and were the subject of actions taken by the laboratory.

He said the suspension of operations at the laboratory, the contract competition and now the preparations for changing over to the new contract have absorbed much of his time. He addressed a number of the outstanding questions and promised to be more personally involved in the future.

Bernie Pleau, a spokesperson for the local DOE office, said the board was highly regarded. "We really think this is a very value-added board," he said. "They work tremendously well within the charter and they have some tremendously well qualified people."

In September, the CAB formally recommended that Area G not be expanded, according to current plans that call for a new 30-acre extension of the site into Zone 4, even while the process of closing down the current 60-acres of deposits in Area G continues under a consent order with the state.

"We are undoubtedly going to have to expand the storage of waste in Area G," Wilmott said.

He said he agreed with the recommendation personally and that his emotional response is favorable, "But I can't do it in isolation from the rest of the complex."

He offered instead to look for every way to minimize the volume and encourage environmental awareness at the laboratory.

Nuclear watchdog groups like the Los Alamos Study Group have campaigned for many years to end the practice of burying nuclear and chemical waste in shallow pits on a laboratory mesa-top.

LASG Executive Director Mello used the public comment period to press the case for closure once again, asking why DOE has not followed its own requirements for a lifecycle cost analysis of disposing waste at Area G compared to alternatives. He also suggested that the CAB follow very carefully the new groundwater monitoring issues.

Recent problems with the monitoring programs and the possibilities of fast pathways for contaminants to reach the aquifer raise the potential damages from continued burials of low-level and hazardous wastes.

"You can't predict any specific outcome from point A to point B," for groundwater seeping into the complex geology of the mountain, he said. "DOE has spent more than $1 billion on cleanup so far. It has always proceeded on good intentions and poor management."

Historically CABs have failed and have been shut down for becoming too assertive. Others have lost participation through inactivity or a perceived collusion with their DOE sponsors.

Asked how he maintains the balance, Campbell said today that he has spent much of his 35-year career in environmental remediation activities.

"I've been fortunate to work with leading companies that had the resources and had their public image at the forefront of

their concerns," he said. "I've found it important to work with the regulatory community and to give the public confidence in what the solutions are that are being proposed, so then it becomes truly a win-win situation."

Aware of a newly emerging public issue, Campbell has proposed another major conference in the spring on groundwater contamination issues at the laboratory.

printable version
e-mail this story
