

## Bingaman Seeks Funds For Design of Weapons Facility

BY IAN HOFFMAN  
Journal Staff Writer

Sen. Jeff Bingaman is pressing for design of the nation's first new plutonium- and weapons-research facility in more than 20 years.

Bingaman, D-N.M., is seeking \$5 million in year 2000 defense funds to design a replacement for Los Alamos National Laboratory's troubled Chemistry and Metallurgical Research building.

Nuclear-disarmament advocates

are likely to mount vigorous opposition. They argue a new weapons lab for Los Alamos is just as unnecessary now in the wake of the Cold War as in 1990, when Congress killed lab plans for a \$385 million Special Nuclear Materials Laboratory.

"It's like a horror movie: It keeps coming back," said Greg Mello, head of the Santa Fe-based Los Alamos Study Group. "There's nev-

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er a stake through the heart. When will we wake from the 'Night of the Living Dead' ideas?"

So far, the lab's owners at the U.S. Department of Energy are undecided on seeking a new nuclear-weapons lab for Los Alamos and plan to study the issue for another year. Meanwhile, the DOE plans to continue spending \$125 million to keep the CMR, as the building is called, running through 2010.

Inside CMR, scientists and engineers work on nuclear-weapons parts, as well as perform tests for the lab's environmental and cleanup programs. At times, CMR has hosted high-level nuclear waste, tests on nerve gases and a variety of other defense projects.

"There are problems with that building," said Bingaman spokeswoman Kristen Ludecke. "It's not an emergency, but it's a question of whether it would be cost-effective to build a new facility."

With the \$5 million, engineers and architects could begin sketching out a rough size and design for the new lab, she said.

"This would not be a Taj Mahal but a scaled-down, streamlined facility that would meet the needs of the lab at a lower cost than they are met now," Ludecke said.

The 1950s-vintage CMR, once the largest building in New Mexico, is a massive holdover of the Cold War that has frustrated efforts to extend its working life. Besides outdated systems — electricity, fire and ventilation — CMR is more contaminated than lab managers once thought. Renovations in 1996 and 1997 ran at least \$15 million overbudget and, combined with unsafe building operations, caused lab managers to shut down work at CMR for months.

Last year, geologists found yet another problem: An earthquake fault lies under a third of the building.

Officials of the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board, an oversight

agency for the nuclear-weapons complex, say the U.S. Department of Energy should find a new place for its work with weapons-grade plutonium and uranium at the CMR building.

Energy Department and Los Alamos executives say CMR's primary work — analytical chemistry on nuclear-weapons materials — is a unique function that must be replaced.

Critics such as Mello counter that CMR is mostly empty, a building in search of work to justify its existence.

"We've never seen what is going on in the CMR building that needs to be replaced. It's a collection of empty space and projects that don't need to be there," he charges.

Before building a new weapons lab, Mello said, the government should evaluate its current plutonium facilities as well as new ones proposed for Savannah River Site.

In 1990, Bingaman actually had a hand in the demise of LANL's Special

Nuclear Materials Laboratory. He wrote a bill amendment requiring the DOE first to report on its need and supply of nuclear materials labs. The DOE never submitted its report, and a House-Senate conference committee killed funds for the Los Alamos project.

"There's a lot of uncertainty because we don't know what the Energy Department's overall approach to plutonium processing is," Bingaman said at the time.

By then, the Energy Department and Los Alamos had 100 people working on the project and already had spent \$32 million. Ludecke said Bingaman isn't necessarily committed to building the new lab but wants to "begin the conversation."

"It doesn't lock us into building a new structure," she said. "It shouldn't be taboo to talk about a new building. If the current structure is continuing to deteriorate and cost a great deal to repair, we should be able to examine whether a new building makes sense."

# \$5 million requested for new LANL complex

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By BARBARA FERRY  
The New Mexican

Sen. Jeff Bingaman is seeking federal money to replace a problem-plagued research facility at Los Alamos National Laboratory that sits atop an earthquake fault.

Bingaman, D-New Mexico, has requested \$5 million to begin designing a replacement for the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Building, a 550,000-square-foot research complex which was built in the early 1950s.

Researchers at the complex do chemical studies on plutonium, uranium and other radioactive materials. The building, which employs 350 people, was shut down twice in 1997 because of safety problems.

Money for a new building is not included in President Clinton's budget request, an aide to Bingaman said.

"This is something Sen. Bingaman has decided to push for," said spokeswoman Jude McCartin. "The (CMR) Building is old. It doesn't have proper ventilation. We can continue to make upgrades, but eventually the long-term answer is to get a

**Researchers at the complex do chemical studies on plutonium, uranium and other radioactive materials.**

new building."

She said there have been no estimates of how much a new building would cost, though a DOE official estimated the price would be at least \$500 million.

LANL spokesman Jim Danneskiold said the laboratory has "no plans, no drawings for a new building." He referred all other questions about the budget request to the Department of Energy. Al Stotts, a spokesman for the DOE in Albuquerque said the department plans to decide this year what to do with the building.

A Santa Fe disarmament activist said the lab wants to expand its capacity to produce plutonium "pits," or triggers for

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nuclear weapons.

"The seismic and other issues surrounding the CMR building provide a public-relations opportunity but not a reason for a new facility," said Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group, who asked, "Why is it that the public is continually asked to fund expansions of nuclear programs or new nuclear facilities under the guise of increasing 'safety'?"

Current DOE plans call for the lab to have the capacity to produce 50 plutonium pits a year by 2005. The CMR building is one of the facilities planned to be used for pit production.

Bruce Hall of Peace Action, a disarmament group headquartered in Washington, D.C., said

activists would fight any attempt to spend public money on a new nuclear-production facility at LANL.

"It's pure pork for the lab," Hall said. "With the Cold War over, we have to question why we need to spend more money on nuclear weapons."

In 1980s, a proposal to build a \$450 million Special Nuclear Materials Laboratory at LANL sparked community opposition. In 1990, Congress rejected the plan as too expensive.

Safety concerns — including worker accidents — including an explosion that caused \$100,000 in damage, safety violations and defects in the complex's fire alarm and ventilation systems led Los Alamos officials to halt work at the CMR building twice. Among other concerns, a federal

oversight board, along with lab critics — fear that a catastrophic accident such as a fire could release plutonium into the atmosphere.

DOE already has spent about \$62 million on safety upgrades at the building. Renovations were temporarily halted by DOE in 1997 after cost overruns for the first phase of the project reached \$15 million. A senior DOE official blamed the overruns on "weak management and poor design effort."

DOE's Stotts said the renovations have resumed and are expected to keep the building running until 2010.

But renovations were further

complicated by geologists' discovery of a seismic fault underneath last spring. The 45-year-old building is too old for seismic upgrades, lab officials said in a report.