Los Alamos Study Group

Nuclear Disarmament • Environmental Protection • Social Justice • Economic Sustainability

Plutonium pit production and related issues in the New Mexico and national press

Print media only, November 1989 through December 2006

January 17, 2007

Today's popular opposition to pit production in New Mexico is just the latest phase of an opposition that began in 1989. Opposition is certainly not confined to the immediate context of the National Nuclear Security Administration's (NNSA's) "Complex 2030" proposal. Public opposition to pit production at LANL has been vocal, consistent, and strong in New Mexico for 17 years so far. At the present, there is no publicly-expressed support for pit production at LANL whatsoever, even in Los Alamos.

Easily-accessed evidence of widespread popular opposition to pit production can be found at www.lasg.org; see especially the *Call for Nuclear Disarmament* there.

For the most part this compilation includes only those articles which mention or otherwise involve the Los Alamos Study Group. The Study Group began formal operation in May 1992, and prior to this our media files are spotty. To compensate for this, this compilation includes a broader range of materials from 1989 to 1992. Opposition to warhead core ("pit") production at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) began in the fall of 1989, just a few months after pit production ceased at the Rocky Flats Plant.

This compilation does not include all the New Mexico press articles on this subject, although it includes most of them. National coverage is also incomplete. We have not included our own publications or any listing of radio and television programming (local, national, and foreign) on the subject of pit production at LANL.

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Paper: Santa Fe New Mexican, The (NM)
Title: Watchdog groups sue to stop LANL weapons upgrade work
Date: March 18, 1997

A coalition of nuclear watchdog groups including two Santa Fe organizations wants a federal judge to prevent $300 million worth of planned upgrades at Los Alamos National Laboratory weapons facilities from going forward pending a legal action against the Department of Energy.

Among the projects that could be affected are planned upgrades to Technical Area 55, the lab's top secret plutonium research plant; to the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research building; and to the Nuclear Materials Storage Facility.

``We will seek an injunction of all activities related to the production of plutonium pits," Greg Mello, of the Santa Fe-based **Los Alamos Study group**, said Monday.

The hazardous work of building plutonium pits grapefruit-size metal spheres found at the heart of most nuclear bombs was recently transferred from the Rocky Flats plant near Denver to Los Alamos. The lab is expected to build from 20 to 80 pits per year far fewer than the more than 1,000 pits a year that were built at Rocky Flats during the Cold War.

In a March 14 letter to the Energy Department, the coalition of more than two dozen groups informed DOE attorneys that they are seeking to reopen a seven-year lawsuit between the agency and citizen organizations.

The groups say the agency has failed to live up to the terms of a 1990 settlement that required the DOE to conduct environmental studies of its plans to rebuild and clean up the U.S. nuclear weapons complex.

Energy Department officials were not reached for comment.

A laboratory spokesman declined comment.

The coalition is led by the National Resources Defense Council, a Washington D.C. organization, and includes groups from California, Nevada, Washington state, Tennessee, Utah and Texas. The other Santa Fe organization is Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety. Citizens for Alternatives to Radioactive Dumping, an Albuquerque group, is also part of the coalition.

The coalition's major claim is that the agency has failed to properly evaluate alternatives to its plan to spend $40 billion over the next 10 years on revamping its nuclear weapons facilities.

The plan is controversial not just because of its cost. It is widely viewed as a political payoff to the nuclear weapons establishment, which was forced earlier in the decade to accept the termination of underground nuclear testing.

The coalition also says the DOE has fallen short in analyzing its plans to handle nuclear and chemical waste generated by future weapons work.

Christopher Paine, senior research associate with the National Resources Defense Council, said the agency has strayed so far from the 1990 settlement that its future plans ``no longer add up to a coherent whole.

``They've confused themselves and the public," Paine said.

The stockpile stewardship and management program is designed to maintain the nation's existing nuclear arsenal in a state of readiness. This is to be accomplished in two ways: by replacing aging weapons components and by testing weapons without blowing them up in an array of new facilities.

The Los Alamos arm of the program is set to receive $416 million in 1997, about a 10 percent increase from the previous year. The lab is also set to install new supercomputers as a way to simulate nuclear testing.

Author: KEITH EASTHOUSE
Section: Main
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Lawsuit To Be Renewed Over DOE Studies

Group Targets Impact Statements

3/18/97

Journal Staff Report

Anti-nuclear activists plan to reopen a 1989 suit alleging the U.S. Department of Energy again has failed to perform adequate environmental studies on its largest nuclear weapons and waste-cleanup programs.

The renewed case will attack much of DOE's blueprints for post-Cold War work in weapons research and the cleanup and management of weapons-related radioactive wastes.

More than two dozen environmental groups nationwide — three in New Mexico — told the DOE on Monday that they view three key environmental-impact statements in those areas as deficient or nonexistent.

DOE officials could not be reached Monday night for comment.

One EIS on stewardship or caretaking of the nation's nuclear stockpile gives the green light to Los Alamos National Laboratory for an $800 million program to begin building plutonium pits — the fission triggers for thermonuclear weapons — by 2003.

"We just think all of this is rushing forward all too fast," said Greg Mello, president of the Santa Fe-based Los Alamos Study Group, which opposes nuclear proliferation.

The groups settled the 1989 case with the DOE on the agency's promise to perform the elaborate environmental studies. The renewed suit will allege the result falls short of a comprehensive review.

For example, Mello said, the EIS on stockpile stewardship fails to study potential environmental impacts from the $422 million Advanced Hydrotest Facility, planned for Los Alamos. Yet initial spending on the experimental machine already has begun.

The groups hope the suit will prompt the DOE and Congress to rethink the trend toward increased spending on weapons and reduced spending on waste cleanup, said Jay Coghlan, program director with another Santa Fe anti-nuclear group, Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety.

"Given the choice, would the taxpaying public choose to fund pork-barrel nuclear weapons programs producing more nuclear waste or would it choose cleanup programs?" Coghlan said.

"We think taxpayers are due the peace dividend they paid for long ago."

The groups say they will file to reopen the case after the 10-day notice period expires.

The motion will be reviewed by the original judge, Stanley Sporkin of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, which handles appeals of actions by federal agencies.

Watchdog groups sue to stop LANL weapons upgrade work

3/18/97

By KEITH EASTHOUSE
The New Mexican

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WEAPONS

Continued from Page A-1

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Anti-nuke groups reopen lawsuit

4/30/97

By STEPHEN T. SHANKLAND
Monitor Managing Editor

Several environmental and anti-nuclear groups planned to reopen a 1989 lawsuit today against the Department of Energy.

Jay Coghlan of Santa Fe-based Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety said today that the groups planned to file a complaint and a motion requesting a preliminary injunction.

Coghlan said the complaint argues that DOE failed to live up to a 1990 stipulation that required two programmatic environmental impact statements (PEISs) dealing with the future of the nuclear weapons complex.

The complaint also argues that the Stockpile Stewardship and Management PEIS — one of the PEISs that resulted from the agreement — is inadequate.

Greg Mello of the Santa Fe-based Los Alamos Study Group, another group involved in the lawsuit, said the motion for preliminary injunction seeks to stop Stockpile Stewardship and Management Programs.

With regard to Los Alamos National Laboratory projects, the motion asks the court to enjoin preparation for nuclear weapon plutonium pit production and the Atlas project, Mello said.

The lawsuit, in addition to the complaint and motion for preliminary injunction, is filed in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. Judge Stanley Sporkin heard the case in 1989 and 1990, and will continue to hear this phase

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SUIT

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of it, Coghlan said.

DOE spokeswoman Chris Kielich said today that now that the matter is in litigation again, DOE won't comment.

However, Energy Secretary Federico Peña, during his visit to Los Alamos on April 18, defended DOE's environmental review of the future nuclear weapons complex.

Peña said he disagreed with the environmental groups' contention that the PEISs were inadequate.

Peña said DOE did "extensive work" on the environmental reviews and said DOE is "very confident" that DOE made the right decisions based on the best scientific data.

Peña also said there always are people who object to major policy changes, such as the post-Cold War switch to stockpile stewardship, which uses scientific means instead of actual nuclear tests to keep nuclear weapons reliable and safe.

Coghlan said the 1990 stipulation required DOE to prepare two PEISs: a Waste Management PEIS and what was then called the Reconfiguration PEIS. The Reconfiguration PEIS was later split into several other PEISs, including the Stockpile Stewardship and Management PEIS and the Tritium PEIS.

Coghlan said DOE completed the draft version of the Waste Management PEIS in August 1995, but hasn't finished the document.

And, he said, one of the reasons the Stockpile Stewardship and Management PEIS is inadequate is because it depends on the incomplete Waste Management PEIS to describe how waste will be treated in the future.

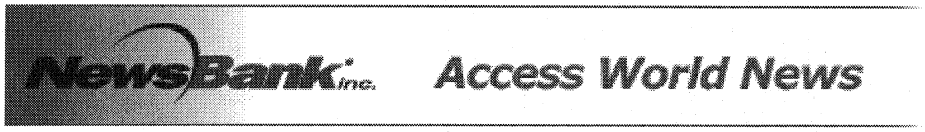
"DOE ... has not honored its court-recorded stipulation," Coghlan said.

Former Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary, shortly before she resigned as energy secretary, signed a record of decision that approved the Stockpile Stewardship and Management Program.

Coghlan said the Stockpile Stewardship and Management PEIS fails to adequately consider alternatives to stockpile stewardship.

"DOE posits what it wants, and knocks down everything else," Coghlan said.

Coghlan said he objects to the fact that DOE argued some facilities were too far out in the future to be considered in the Stockpile Stewardship and Management PEIS. In the case of the Advanced Hydrotest Facility, being planned by LANL scientists, the facility wasn't considered in the PEIS, Coghlan said. However, he added, "Already, significant amounts of money are being spent" on it.



Paper: Albuquerque Tribune, The (NM)
Title: Environmental groups to file suit against DOE
Date: April 30, 1997

WASHINGTON -- A coalition of 40 environmental groups prepared today to sue the federal government, charging the U.S. Department of Energy broke its promise to study alternatives to expanding its nuclear-weapons program at Los Alamos, Sandia and other national labs.

The lawsuit, expected to be filed today in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, also contends that DOE has refused to set national standards for its nuclear-waste cleanup program.

The environmental groups are to ask the court to take two steps:

* Ban DOE from the construction of any new facilities in its nuclear-weapons program until it analyzes "reasonable" alternatives. The ban would affect several hundred million dollars' worth of construction projects at Los Alamos and about $100 million worth at Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque.

* Force DOE to determine the environmental impact of its nuclear-waste cleanup program.

Among the groups filing the lawsuit are two New Mexico environmental organizations: the **Los Alamos Study Group** and Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety.

The lawsuit is a sequel to one filed in 1990 by the environmental groups. At that time, DOE signed a legal agreement requiring it to analyze plans for new nuclear-weapons research facilities, as well as do an environmental-impact statement for its nuclear-waste cleanup program.

"Through this lawsuit, we are seeking to have DOE honor the agreement they made in 1990," said Jay Coghlan of Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, based in Santa Fe.

"We also want to bring the whole matter before the public gaze, and reverse the situation where money for weapons takes precedence over money for cleanup."

DOE officials couldn't be reached today for comment on the lawsuit.

But the heads of the Sandia and Los Alamos labs recently have urged Congress to beef up funding for the nuclear-weapons program.

The lab directors contend their dollars are stretched too thin to keep up with current nuclear-weapons research as well as build the new research facilities they say they need to ensure the safety of the current stockpile.

Among the facilities to be built at Los Alamos is one that would make the lab the nation's only manufacturer of plutonium triggers needed to detonate nuclear weapons.

Author: Karen MacPherson TRIBUNE REPORTER
Section: Local News
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Fund Crunch Halts Lab Renovations

Officials Unsure Why First Phase Is $8 Million Over

5/16/97

By Ian Hoffman
Journal Staff Writer

Budget overruns estimated at $8 million have forced Los Alamos National Laboratory to shut down renovations at its largest lab building.

Lab officials admitted Thursday to uncertainty over how much work remains and how they so quickly spent nearly all the $51.6 million budget for initial renovations at the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Building.

"It's unfortunate we didn't have people who could tell us those things," said T.J. Trapp, a manager in the lab's nuclear materials and stockpile management program who is responsible for major nuclear-facility upgrades.

"It happened late (in the renovations), and we don't have all the answers. We have to go get those answers now," Trapp said.

LANL faces what could be months of figuring out what remains to be done at the building and lobbying the U.S. Department of Energy in Washington for money to do it.

The DOE's Los Alamos office was preparing to step in when Paul T. Cunningham, director of the lab's nuclear materials and stockpile management program, ordered the shutdown April 26. Work ended May 1.

"I don't think it was managed as it should be," said Jim Phoenix, the DOE's facility representative for the 550,000-square-foot building. "The laboratory was not watching over it."

The building, designed in 1949, began operations in 1952 as the lab's main facility for chemical research on radioactive materials and weapons components. Its wiring and much of the plumbing that carries acid wastes to a treatment plant are more than 40 years old. The renovations are intended to keep the building oper-

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Fund Crunch Halts Lab Renovations

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ating for 20 to 30 years more.

Lab officials call the first phase of the renovations urgent maintenance, consisting mostly of electrical work, coupled with repair of its fire-suppression system and new air-quality monitors for glove-box exhausts, among other things.

The building plays a key role in testing and refurbishing the aging parts of nuclear weapons.

Workers found they had to perform more work than anticipated in areas believed contaminated with radioactive materials, Trapp said. And they found more outdated electrical components that required replacement than anticipated.

"Many of those systems, you can't really tell their condition until you take the power down and open them up to look at them," Trapp said.

One anti-nuclear activist questions the $122.5 million budget for the second phase of the building renovations, which include shoring up the building against earthquakes. About $12 million of that goes to LANL staff for design and operator support, not including $1.75 million for an operational readiness review and $1.23 million for start-up costs.

The renovations' high costs, plus the overruns in the first phase, could undermine the lab's pursuit of more funds for stockpile stewardship and management, its bread-and-butter fund source for at least the next 10 years, said Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group.

"It may cost them. It depends on the lab's ability to represent all of its expenses no matter how outrageous as essential for its plutonium-manufacturing mission," Mello said.

Trapp declined to comment on potential political fallout from the cost overruns. Lab officials are trying to work what they're learning from the renovations into other upgrades, such as those planned for its top-security plutonium facility at Technical Area 55, he said.

"What we're finding is it's costing us more to fix things in some of our nuclear facilities than we originally anticipated," Trapp said.

The lab will need several months to determine the cost of remaining work, which project officials estimate ranges from $3 million to $11 million, Trapp said. The lab faces internal scrutiny to find out why costs were unanticipated, why they mounted so quickly and why project managers kept spending as they closed in on the budget limit.

Asked whether any project managers would be disciplined, Trapp said, "We're still looking at issues associated with that."

Judge dampens fight against nuke program

6/18/97 N.M.

By PHIL STEWART
States News Service

WASHINGTON — In an apparent blow, a federal judge discouraged anti-nuclear activists Tuesday from seeking a court injunction on the Energy Department's $40 billion program to manage the nation's nuclear weapons arsenal.

Instead, Judge Stanley Sporkin told environmentalists to work out their gripes with the Energy Department before the court reconvenes next week.

"It's clear that we have to do something," Sporkin said. "What I'm suggesting is that you talk to each other."

The suit, filed by 39 anti-nuclear organizations, charges that the Energy Department failed to conduct environmental impact studies and to consider "reasonable alternatives" when developing its massive 10-year plan.

Slated plutonium projects at Los Alamos National Laboratory were the subject of repeated attacks by group attorneys. In court proceedings Tuesday, attorney Barbara Finamore said that LANL would face "extreme environmental dangers" under the DOE's plan.

Finamore said the same plutonium projects slated for LANL caused a test site in Colorado to shut down, after more than 700 plutonium-induced fires and several radiation leaks.

"One of the first defects (in the DOE plan) is that it doesn't take

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into account that the same accidents could happen at Los Alamos," Finamore said.

But Sporkin said delaying the nuclear weapons management plan could threaten national security. He also questioned whether Finamore would, if granted the court injunction, object to later DOE proposals.

"Is it the motive to really get them to do what you want," Sporkin asked. "Or is it to get them to give up (on the project) entirely."

Justice Department officials said the DOE would consider recommendations made by the coalition over the next week. But environmental attorney Lisa Dowden said that only a court injunction would alter the course of the nuclear weapons management plan.

"Without a preliminary injunction, (a settlement) is meaningless," Dowden said.

Sporkin scheduled a further hearing June 24 to allow the Justice Department to continue its argument. It is not known when a decision will be made.

Besides Washington-based NRDC, a leading environmental group, plaintiffs include 38 other organizations, many of them grassroots groups that have been active near federal nuclear weapons production and storage facilities around the country.

Groups participating in the lawsuit include two from New Mexico — the Los Alamos Study Group and Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety.

Among other things, the lawsuit would halt new DOE facilities, affecting several hundred million dollars' worth of construction projects at Los Alamos National Laboratory and about $100 million worth at Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque.

Judge reluctant to stop weapons work because of suit

6/18/97

By H. JOSEF HEBERT
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lawyers for an environmentalist group contend the Energy Department failed to consider adequately the environmental impact of a program to revamp the way it manages nuclear weapons.

A lawsuit by the Natural Resources Defense Council asks the court to block parts of the weapons management plan including the construction of a $1 billion laser laboratory in California that is key to simulating nuclear weapons tests.

But U.S. District Judge Stanley Sporkin, hearing arguments on the suit Tuesday, made clear he is hesitant to block the program. He asked lawyers on both sides whether they would agree to a "dual track" in which the program would continue, but additional environmental assessment would be required.

"A judge can't shut down a country from defending itself," Sporkin said, alluding to suggestions by the government that the laser program might have national security implications.

But Sporkin also expressed some sympathy for arguments by NRDC lawyers that the Energy Department had not conducted adequate environmental impact assessments.

Lisa Dowden, attorney for the NRDC, said the Energy Department, in developing the nuclear weapons stockpile management plan, did not consider "reasonable alternatives" and in many cases did not adequately examine potential environmental harm at various proposed facilities.

She also maintained that only a small fraction of the program even had an environmental analysis.

Martin LaLonde, a Justice Department lawyer, replied that alternatives were considered but did not meet national security needs.

He said the management plan, including the laser facility in California, are designed to assure that nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War years are in proper condition.

The injunction requested by the NRDC also would halt planned tests later this summer at the Nevada Test Site in which small amounts of nuclear material would be used in a chemical explosion. The "subcritical" explosion is designed to gather information that would be used in analyzing weapons and warheads in the laboratory.

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7/20/97

LANL, testing

We are writing to clear up any misunderstanding that may have been created by The New Mexican article of June 25, 1997, LANL Nuke Test Gets Go Ahead. The coalition of 39 peace and environmental organizations (which includes our groups) that is suing the Department of Energy on environmental grounds opposes the two subcritical underground nuclear experiments planned this summer at the Nevada Test Site. The coalition of plaintiffs has not dropped subcritical tests from the lawsuit, only from the request for preliminary injunction blocking expansion of the nuclear weapons complex until adequate public review has been completed. Our challenge to the underground subcritical nuclear tests slated as part of the DOEs Stockpile Stewardship and Management Program is very much alive.

The coalition charges that DOE failed to produce a legally adequate programmatic review of its proposed stewardship program for the nations nuclear arsenal, including the subcritical tests. Regarding the subcritical experiments, these alternatives should certainly include conducting them above-ground, not conducting them at all, and closure or conversion of the test site itself. The coalition may still request the judge to issue, as part of his final ruling, an injunction permanently enjoining subcritical tests and other parts of the weapons complex until adequate analysis is completed.

At a hearing on the motion for preliminary injunction on June 17, Judge Sporkin appeared unwilling to undertake a detailed analysis of DOEs national security claims regarding the imminent subcritical test in his courtroom. While not persuaded there are any true national security concerns, in view of the judges attitude, on June 24 the coalition limited its request for preliminary injunction to certain key facilities in DOE plans the $1.3 billion National Ignition Facility at Livermore Lab in California and upgrades to the Chemical and Metallurgical Research (CMR) Building and the Nuclear Materials Storage Facility (NMSF) at Los Alamos. Because of Congresss own doubts about NIF and the CMR upgrade, the House of Representatives has recently proposed to fence appropriations for those two facilities. We believe that Congress will look skeptically at the NMSF as well. That facility, an underground storage vault for plutonium pits, was built in the mid 1980s for $25 million, but never used because of fundamental design deficiencies and shoddy construction. LANL is now preparing to rebuild it for $56 million, with possible storage capacity for 5,000 plutonium pits. Approval for the rebuild is exempted from public review on the basis of an environmental assessment over a decade old.

Scores of major public interest groups, including the plaintiffs in this case, also staunchly oppose the subcritical nuclear experiments as unnecessary, provocative to other nations, and contrary to U.S. nonproliferation and disarmament policies. These groups, including many of the plaintiffs, organized a national call-in day June 26 to DOE headquarters to call for cancellation of the subcritical tests, the National Ignition Facility, and other new weapons facilities and upgrades. This opposition is gaining momentum, and has spread to the Congress where 44 representatives recently sent a letter to the president urging that the tests be canceled. According to these representatives, The U.S. is unwisely creating a testing norm under which other nations could justify conducting similar underground nuclear weapons experiments at their test sites.

We co-plaintiffs believe that the United States is setting a terrible international example, so soon after the signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban treaty. Our opposition to these tests remains strong, and the future conduct of such tests as part of DOEs overall stockpile program remains a vital element in the environmental lawsuit.

Jay Coghlan

Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety

Barbara Finamore

Natural Resources Defense Council

Greg Mello

Los Alamos Study Group

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Say a firm and joyful no to terrible weapons of mass destruction

Greg Mello
Commentary

7/21/97
New Mexico

The bomb first was our weapon. Then it became our diplomacy. Next it became out economy. Now it's become our culture. We've become the people of the bomb. — E.L. Doctorow

Nowhere is this more true than here in New Mexico, where the University of California (Los Alamos) and the Lockheed-Martin Company (Sandia) are fast becoming world leaders in the production — no longer just the design — of nuclear weapons. These products are "weapons of mass destruction," a term that also includes chemical and biological weapons. Making weapons like this is not quite an ordinary job. Let's face it: making weapons of mass destruction is not a great deall different than making ovens in case a Holocaust is needed someday.

Even within the class of weapons of mass destruction nuclear weapons are uniquely destructive. Dr. Siegfried S. Hecker, LANL's director, told Congress in March that nuclear weapons "are unique in their ability to inflict massive damage to a target — swiftly and surely ... nuclear weapons are the 'big stick' that defends our homeland ...." And let no one doubt, Dr. Hecker said, that "we" would be "unwilling or unable to use the nuclear weapons in our stockpile."

This kind of bellicose rhetoric is new. It projects what the "warheads" hope will be a new consensus of legitimacy for nuclear weapons, a watershed shift in perception and hence funding. Already the nuclear weapons budget is considerably higher, in constant dollars, than it was on average during the Cold War. And it is growing. Hecker promotes weapons of mass destruction to keep the money flowing to his lab — by the truckload if possible.

Hecker is not alone. He is more than matched by Sandia director Paul Robinson, who told the *Los Angeles Times* that any further reductions in the U.S. arsenal would require, in his view, increased targeting of the Russian people.

These men are assumed to speak for all their employees. In the language of political pork, the *lingua franca* of Congress, they are assumed to speak for the rest of the state as well — we, the people of the bomb.

The labs' nuclear promotion begins, but does not end, with weapons of mass destruction. One of Los Alamos' tactical goals is now to create what it calls "Our Plutonium Future," in part through its "Global Nuclear Vision Project," a series of meetings between the nuclear elite of many nations that is designed to work out an agenda to shape public policy and perceptions regarding "all things nuclear."

Walking its talk, Los Alamos is now poised to begin manufacturing "pits," the plutonium cores of nuclear weapons. But this too is just the beginning. Lab managers hope to please their "customers" (their term) in other ways as well, including establishing the capability to make complete thermonuclear explosives. These barbaric missions are painted with an Orwellian rouge that disguises self-serving manipulation; flashy euphemisms cover repulsive realities. Service, so to speak, with a sordid smile.

The fact that a university would stump for such work is an education in itself.

The labs' future thus looks a lot like the past, only more so. But what about the rest of us — downwind, downstreat and down dollar? What does our future hold?

I think you can see it, approaching from the next century like a highway sign: "Welcome to New Mexico! World Capital of Weapons of Mass Destruction."

Whether visible or invisible, that would be *our* sign, *our* identity, *our* legacy to our children and to our land.

Not long ago a Hispanic farmer was asked: "What does the Rio Grande mean to you?"

"It is the river of righteousness," was the reply. In these vivid, memorable words, we hear a heart and mind not separate from the world — a world which is flowing, intrinsically ethical and fundamentally Good.

That river will flow forever, but the path of nuclear weapons, the path we are choosing, does not lead by these waters. Where does it go? Through the Jornada del Muerto. I am afraid there will be nothing for us to drink there. And I am not sure tourists will continue to find it so very attractive either.

It is simply no good to try to build a culture on weapons of mass destruction. These weapons do not deter threats to our "national security;" they *are* threats to our security. They do not deter "rogue states;" they *define* rogue states. Those who make them do not protect us from terrorists; they *are* terrorists, witting or unwitting. These weapons deter nothing but the military budget cuts we so plainly need to finance our schools, care for our families and protect our communities.

More than this, these weapons corrode our conscience, undermine the authority of the state they supposedly protect, and attack the democratic freedoms they purport to guard. They and the fraudulent paradigm of "security" they embody distract us from the urgent cries of a world — our only world — being relentlessly crushed beneath the bulldozers of greed.

In a world of inverted values, where our local masters of war patriotically promote weapons of mass destruction, a firm and joyful "no!" from the barricades is a liberating "yes!" to human life and the generations yet to come.

Greg Mello of Santa Fe is a member of the Los Alamos Study Group.

DOE arms program foes lose challenge

8/12/97

By RAY RIVERA
The New Mexican

Environmentalists have lost a major battle to curb the Department of Energy's Stockpile Stewardship and Management Program.

A federal judge on Friday ruled against a consortium of anti-nuclear groups seeking to prevent increased plutonium pit production at Los Alamos National Laboratory and the creation of the National Ignitions Facility at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in Livermore, Calif.

But environmentalists say the ruling isn't a total loss.

The opinion issued Friday by U.S. District Judge Stanley Sporkin in Washington D.C. said national security concerns warranted the continuation of stockpile stewardship, a DOE program to maintain the nation's aging nuclear weapons arsenal. In the same ruling, however, he ordered the DOE "to perform a fuller disclosure of the environmental, health and safety risks asso-

Please see **DOE,** Page B-3

DOE

Continued from Page B-1

ciated with the plutonium pit fabrication program at Los Alamos National Laboratory and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory."

"First of all, we're disappointed the judge didn't see the wisdom of stopping the construction or upgrading of DOE's facilities," said Jay Coghlin of the Santa Fe-based Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety. "At the same time, it's pleasing that he recognized that many of our concerns are real."

Concerned Citizens and the Los Alamos Study Group were among 39 groups nationwide to file the suit.

Coghlin referred to a passage in the judge's 24-page opinion that stated: "The court recognizes fully that there have been enough accidents involving nuclear programs to make Plaintiffs' concerns over the environmental, health and safety issues in this case real."

Sporkin cited the closure of the Rocky Flats pit production plant in 1989 after more than 700 plutonium-induced fires and several radiation leaks.

Plutonium pits are the grapefruit-sized triggers at the heart of nuclear warheads. Pit production involves the processing of substantial quantities of plutonium, a highly toxic nuclear explosive material. The DOE's proposal to transfer Rocky Flats' production capability to LANL would increase both the number and types of pits LANL produces. The lab is currently able to produce about 20 pits a year.

A spokesman at Los Alamos National Laboratory referred questions to the Department of Energy in Washington. Officials there could not be reached late Monday.

Study group sues to get lab weapons information

10/31/92

By STEPHEN T. SHANKLAND
Monitor Managing Editor

The Los Alamos Study Group sued the Department of Energy Thursday in an effort to obtain information about Los Alamos National Laboratory listed in six requests.

The study group complaint asks U.S. District Judge Martha Vasquez to order the DOE "to produce immediately the documents sought by the Los Alamos Study Group" and "to commence an investigation to determine whether disciplinary action is warranted against any federal employee for DOE's unlawful pattern and practice of withholding information...."

Greg Mello of the study group said today, "These six are ones that are, to our view, quite clear-cut instances of foot-dragging. They represent a constructive denial of our rights to get information."

The complaint said the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) "requires federal agencies to respond to public requests for information within 10 days. In some cases, DOE's responses to the Los Alamos Study Group's 14 pending FOIA requests are more than five months late."

A news release said the study group is requesting information on "the purpose, general description, and status of nuclear weapons projects at LANL; documents regarding LANL's program to develop a replacement warhead for the Navy's submarine-launched missiles; budget codes and general descriptions of current nuclear weapons projects; background documents relating to LANL's plans to upgrade its defunct Nuclear Materials Storage Facility...; travel records regarding thousands of trips LANL employees took to the Washington, D.C., area and to foreign countries in 1996; and budgets and personnel involved in DOE and LANL public relations and 'corporate citizenship' activities in New Mexico."

However, LANL spokesman John Gustafson said today the delays in getting information to the study group are simply because of the amount of work needed to fulfill the complex requests, the limited number of people who fulfill the requests, and the fact that people at the lab have plenty to do as it is.

"The office that handles these information requests has two people working on them. Currently there are 50 open cases (requests), of which the study group represents 12," Gustafson said.

And the lab is working on the requests, Gustafson added.

"Given the amount of staffing we have to direct to these requests, and given the complexity of Greg's requests, it's not surprising it takes a little bit of time to fulfill it," Gustafson said.

In the case of the travel information, the request produced a 1,100-page document that somebody has to go through to screen out confidential information such as employee addresses or credit card numbers, Gustafson said. This work must be done by Travel Office employees who have their regular jobs to worry about. "When are they supposed to do it? They have to find time amidst their normal job activities," Gustafson said.

FOIA requests submitted to DOE are referred to LANL, said Gustafson and DOE spokesman Al Stotts.

Mello said that DOE-Albuquerque FOIA personnel "have told us that LANL is uniquely unresponsive" to FOIA requests.

Stotts said LANL accounts for 30 to 40 percent of the FOIA requests sent to DOE-Albuquerque — more FOIA

(Please see FOIA, Page 6)

Los Alamos Monitor

FOIA

(from Page 1)

requests than any of the other facilities DOE-Albuquerque oversees. In addition, many of the LANL FOIA requests are for historical documents that require manual searches through archives. And about 60 percent of the LANL FOIA requests produce material with classified information, which means the document must be analyzed line-by-line by a single classification officer at LANL, Stotts said.

Because of frustrations in getting information from the lab, the study group has ratcheted its requests to increasingly formal levels such as FOIA requests, Mello said.

Mello also complained that many of the requests could be handled informally by simply asking the LANL employees involved. Instead, the study group is forced to have its requests channeled through the Community Involvement and Outreach (CIO) Office. "It's kind of a make-work deal and it's kind of a filtering deal," Mello said.

Gustafson responded, "The people that have documents have jobs that they are hired to do. Their job is not to make people (like Greg Mello) happy. That's why we have an organization like CIO, to work with these outside groups."

FLAG CORPS

DOE Sued for LANL Documents

BY IAN HOFFMAN 10/31/97
Journal Staff Writer

A Santa Fe arms-control organization sued the U.S. Department of Energy on Thursday, accusing the agency of illegally stonewalling requests for public documents about nuclear weapons work at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

The Los Alamos Study Group's lawsuit takes the unusual tack of asking a federal judge to order an investigation of DOE employees.

DOE officials said they had not seen the lawsuit and declined to comment.

The activist group contends the DOE has tolerated failure by its weapons lab in Los Alamos to adequately respond to information requests for up to six months.

Federal law and DOE rules set a response deadline of 10 days.

"I'm perfectly willing to believe the DOE (public information) people would like to do a good job, if only Los Alamos would let them," said the study group's

See **ENERGY** *on* **PAGE 3**

Energy Department Sued for LANL Documents

from **PAGE 1**

leader, Greg Mello. "But in this, as in so many other matters, the contractor is running the DOE. The lab is supposed to work for DOE, not vice versa."

Mello's group alerts government officials, the public and media to unsafe or questionable lab operations.

In requests dating to the summer of 1996, Mello and colleagues first asked the lab for the information — ranging from lists of nuclear-weapons projects to details of lab spending in northern New Mexico.

Among topics of interest: the cost and purpose of thousands of trips by lab scientists to Washington, D.C., and abroad, plus background papers on more than $35 million in planned repairs to a nuclear-materials storage facility built for $17 million but never opened.

When the lab didn't respond to these requests, the group filed formal requests with DOE officials in Albuquerque under the Freedom of Information Act.

The DOE then referred the requests back to the lab, which admits it has not responded promptly.

Only two lab workers handle requests under the Freedom of Information Act and the California Information Practices Act, which also applies to the lab because it is operated by the University of California.

They are working on 50 open requests, 12 from the study group, said a lab spokesman, John Gustafson.

"They are working as fast as they can given limitations of staffing," Gustafson said. "We're part of the (FOIA) process and things are admittedly slow on our end."

Mello's group wants information on nuclear weapons, so each document must be reviewed by the lab's single classification officer assigned to FOIAs, Gustafson said.

Requests for travel records, he noted, can generate more than 1,000 pages and overwhelm the lab's travel office.

But Mello's group sees a pattern of delays that is "deliberate...an abuse of discretion," according to the lawsuit filed Thursday in U.S. District Court in Santa Fe.

The group filed a request in July for a single, unclassified summary of weapons work cited in a lab publication.

"This office is still waiting for LANL's response," DOE replied on Oct. 16.

In its lawsuit, the study group asks U.S. District Court Judge Martha Vasquez to order DOE to immediately hand over documents for six information requests and to appoint a special counsel "determine whether disciplinary action is warranted against any federal employee for DOE's unlawful pattern...of withholding information."

11/1/1997

Group: DOE violated public openness law

A Santa Fe watchdog group says the Department of Energy has violated a federal public openness law in not making available in a timely manner information related to Los Alamos National Laboratory's nuclear weapons program.

The **Los Alamos Study Group** says the DOE has failed to respond in a timely way to its information requests, filed under the Freedom of Information Act. The information requested is unclassified.

Energy Department officials were not reached for comment.

Earlier this year the study group won a FOIA lawsuit against the DOE that had to do with the group's efforts to obtain videotapes of a nuclear weapons conference sponsored by the lab.

Mayor to meet with neighborhood groups

Mayor Debbie Jaramillo will meet with the Neighborhood Network, an association of neighborhood groups, next Monday to discuss how her administration has dealt with neighborhood issues.

According to an announcement from the network, the mayor will take questions from members about how Jaramillo's policies have affected neighborhoods.

The meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. Monday in the Southwest Conference Room of St. Vincent Hospital and the public is invited to attend. For more information, call Karen Heldmeyer at 982-3968.

Woman wants to run for representative

Diann Bradshaw of Mountainair, chairman of the Torrance County Planning and Zoning Board, announced Thursday that she will run as Democratic candidate for the District 50 state House of Representatives seat in 1998. Gary King, the District 50 incumbent, has announced that he will run for governor next year.

Bradshaw, who moved to the Mountainair area three years ago from Austin, runs a real estate business from her home. District 50 includes much of southern Santa Fe County, including the Edgewood area, Madrid and La Cienega.

The New Mexican

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Section: Local
Page: B4

DOE eyes expanded plutonium pit work

▶ *Contingency plan would enable United States to build key nuclear bomb component at Cold War levels*

By KEITH EASTHOUSE
The New Mexican

At a time when the United States is dismantling part of its nuclear arsenal, the Department of Energy has been quietly laying the groundwork to ensure that the nation can — if needed — quickly crank up its ability to produce a key bomb component at levels reminiscent of the Cold War era.

The effort is mainly a DOE initiative, although scientists at Los Alamos National Laboratory have provided some assistance.

A DOE report issued to Congress earlier this year says the purpose of a $1.2 million "contingency plan" is to enable the nation to develop within just five years the ability to build as many as 500 plutonium "pits" annually.

Pits are the grapefruit-size radioactive metal spheres at the heart of most nuclear bombs.

That's 10 times more than is currently planned under a DOE program called "stockpile stewardship," which calls upon Los Alamos to develop the capability to build an average of 50 pits per year by 2005.

A production level of 500 pits would represent a big jump toward Cold War production levels, when the Rocky Flats plant near Denver churned out more than 1,000 pits per year.

A large hike in pit production would probably take place only if there were an ominous change in the international situation — such as a resurgent Russia — or if a major defect were found in one or more weapons systems in the existing arsenal.

The expanded production work, if it is ever undertaken, would probably not take place at Los Alamos due to a lack of facility space.

Instead, according to the report, the work would likely be based at existing facilities at one or more of the following DOE sites: the Savannah River site in South Carolina; the Y-12 plant in Tennessee; the Pantex plant in Amarillo, Texas; and the Nevada Test Site.

Anti-nuclear activists expressed outrage at the plan.

"This will only stir up the right wing in

Please see **PITS**, Page A-2

PITS

Continued from Page A-1

Russia to pour in more money to their nuclear weapons complex," warned Christopher Paine, a senior researcher at the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington D.C.

"We find no reason to acquire any additional capability to manufacture plutonium pits — let alone a level that is 10 times DOE's stated plan," added Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group, a Santa Fe organization.

T.J. Trapp, program manager for nuclear component readiness at the lab, said the concerns about the plan are overblown.

He said if there is a need for expanded pit production, it would likely be geared toward replacing aging pits in existing weapons — not installing pits in brand new bombs as was the case in the Cold War years, when the nuclear arsenal was growing.

He also said it is unlikely there will ever be a need to replace 500 pits a year.

"I don't know that anyone is actually planning for 500 as much as they're planning for a larger capability in case we have a major problem in stockpile," Trapp said.

"It's hard to imagine a problem where we would need to replace more than 500 per year. It's just an upper bound on what's conceivable," Trapp added.

If an expansion is needed, it would be based on a "modular" pit manufacturing system currently under development at LANL, according to the DOE report to Congress. The system has the advantage of being relatively easy to put in place but it requires a good deal of floor area.

Paine accused the agency of "secretly plotting to maintain a very large nuclear weapons stockpile."

The report in which the plan is described, called the *Department of Energy Report on Plutonium Pit Production and Remanufacturing Plans*, was presented to key House and Senate leaders this past summer.

The issuance of the report to Congress was required by federal law.

Paine blasted the contingency plan as being "wrong from every perspective."

"It runs against every one of our treaty commitments," Paine said.

These include the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, designed to stem the spread of nuclear weapons; the START II Treaty, which places ceilings on the American and Russian nuclear arsenals; and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which bans nuclear weapons tests.

The treaty has been approved by the Clinton Administration but not yet ratified by Congress.

Paine said if pits have a lifespan of 20 to 25 years — a conservative estimate — then a production level of 500 pits annually would support a stockpile of 10,000 to 12,000 bombs.

"That's a ludicrously high figure in terms of future requirements," said Paine.

Paine said his organization, which is already challenging the DOE's stockpile stewardship program in court, would "fight with every means at our disposal" if the agency seeks a large expansion of its pit production capability.

An expansion would be contrary to recent recommendations made by the National Academy of Science and Adm. Stansfield Turner, head of the CIA under President Carter.

In a recent report, the academy called for an arsenal no bigger than 300 to 1,000 bombs. Turner, in a new book titled *Caging the Nuclear Genie*, said the country should not have any nuclear weapons deployed and should keep only a few hundred in reserve.

Publication: Jnl Legacy 1995 to July 2005; Date: Dec 4, 1997; Section: Journal North; Page: 59

Edition--Journal North Date--12/04/1997 Page-- 3

DOE Plan Calls for More Bomb Parts

The Associated Press

The U.S. Department of Energy wants to make sure the United States, if it has to, could quickly crank up its ability to churn out a key nuclear bomb part.

The department, in a report this summer to Congress, proposed a $1.2 million contingency plan that would enable the nation to develop, within five years, the ability to build up to 500 plutonium "pits" a year. Pits, about the size of a grapefruit, are radioactive metal spheres at the heart of most nuclear bombs.

Currently, the DOE stockpile stewardship program calls for Los Alamos National Laboratory to develop the capability to build an average of 50 pits a year by 2005. The stewardship program is aimed at making sure the U.S. nuclear arsenal is reliable.

During Cold War production, the DOE's Rocky Flats plant near Denver built more than 1,000 pits per year.

Anti-nuclear activists blasted the contingency plan.

"This will only stir up the right-wing in Russia to pour in more money to their nuclear weapons complex," said Christopher Paine, a senior researcher at the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington, D.C.

Paine said his organization, which is already challenging the DOE's stewardship program in court, would fight if the DOE seeks a large expansion of pit production capability.

Paine accused the DOE of "secretly plotting to maintain a very large nuclear weapons stockpile."

"It runs against every one of our treaty commitments," he said.

Greg Mello of the Santa Fe-based Los Alamos Study Group said his organization sees "no reason to acquire any additional capability to manufacture plutonium pits -- let alone a level that is 10 times DOE's stated plan."

The proposed expanded production, if ever undertaken, probably would not take place at Los Alamos because the lab lacks a large enough facility. Instead, the report to Congress said, the work probably would be based at existing facilities at another DOE site, such as Savannah River in South Carolina; the Y-12 plant in Tennessee; the Pantex plant in Amarillo, Texas; or the Nevada Test Site.

T.J. Trapp, program manager for nuclear component readiness at Los Alamos, said concerns about the contingency plan are overblown.

If the need for expanded production arises, it would likely be geared toward replacing aging pits in existing weapons -- not installing pits in new bombs as was the case during the Cold War when the

nuclear arsenal was growing, Trapp said.

He also said it is unlikely the nation ever will need to replace 500 pits in a year.

"I don't know that anyone is actually planning for 500 as much as they're planning for a larger capability in case we have a major problem in stockpile," Trapp said.

"It's hard to imagine a problem where we would need to replace more than 500 per year. It's just an upper bound on what's conceivable," he said.

12/4/97

Los Alamos Monitor

Report to Congress calls for establishing capacity to build up to 500 pits a year

By The Associated Press

The U.S. Department of Energy wants to make sure the United States could quickly crank up its ability to churn out a key nuclear bomb part.

The department, in a report this summer to Congress, proposed a $1.2 million contingency plan that would enable the nation to develop, within five years, the ability to build up to 500 plutonium "pits" a year. Pits, about the size of a grapefruit, are radioactive metal spheres at the heart of most nuclear bombs.

Currently, the DOE stockpile stewardship program calls for Los Alamos National Laboratory to develop the capability to build an average of 50 pits per year by 2005. The stewardship program is aimed at making sure the U.S. nuclear arsenal is reliable.

During Cold War production, the DOE's Rocky Flats plant near Denver built more than 1,000 pits per year.

Anti-nuclear activists blasted the new contingency plan.

"This will only stir up the right-wing in Russia to pour in more money to their nuclear weapons complex," said Christopher Paine, a senior researcher at the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington, D.C.

Paine said his organization, which is already challenging the DOE's stewardship program in court, would fight if the DOE seeks a large expansion of pit production capability.

Paine accused the DOE of "secretly plotting to maintain a very large nuclear weapons stockpile."

"It runs against every one of our treaty commitments," he said.

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If the need for expanded production arises, it would likely be geared toward replacing aging pits in existing weapons — not installing pits in new bombs as was the case during the Cold War when the nuclear arsenal was growing, Trapp said.

He also said it is unlikely the nation ever will need to replace 500 pits in a year.

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"It's hard to imagine a problem where we would need to replace more than 500 per year. It's just an upper bound on what's conceivable," he said.

Paper: Albuquerque Tribune, The (NM)
Title: DOE wants ability to make more nuke pits
Date: December 4, 1997

The plutonium pits are a vital component in nuclear bombs.

LOS ALAMOS -- The U.S. Department of Energy wants to make sure the United States, if it has to, could quickly crank up its ability to churn out a key nuclear-bomb part.

The department, in a report this summer to Congress, proposed a $1.2 million contingency plan that would enable the nation to develop, within five years, the ability to build up to 500 plutonium "pits" a year. Pits, about the size of a grapefruit, are radioactive metal spheres at the heart of most nuclear bombs.

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During Cold War production, the DOE's Rocky Flats plant near Denver built more than 1,000 pits per year.

Anti-nuclear activists blasted the contingency plan.

"This will only stir up the right-wing in Russia to pour in more money to their nuclear-weapons complex," said Christopher Paine, a senior researcher at the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington, D.C.

Paine said his organization, which is already challenging the DOE's stewardship program in court, would fight an expansion of pit production capability.

Paine accused the DOE of "secretly plotting to maintain a very large nuclear-weapons stockpile."

"It runs against every one of our treaty commitments," he said.

Greg Mello of the **Los Alamos Study Group**, based in Santa Fe, said his organization sees "no reason to acquire any additional capability to manufacture plutonium pits -- let alone at a level that is 10 times DOE's stated plan."

The proposed expanded production, if ever undertaken, probably would not take place at Los Alamos because the lab lacks a large enough facility. Instead, the report to Congress said, the work probably would be based at existing facilities at another DOE site, such as Savannah River in South Carolina; the Y-12 plant in Tennessee; the Pantex plant in Amarillo, Texas; or the Nevada Test Site.

T.J. Trapp, program manager for nuclear component readiness at Los Alamos, said concerns about the contingency plan are overblown.

He also said it is unlikely the nation ever will need to replace 500 pits in a year.

Author: THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
Section: Local News
Page: A3

Paper: The Dallas Morning News
Title: Nuclear buildup proposed Contingency plan is for bomb part
Author: Associated Press
Date: December 4, 1997
Section: NEWS
Page: 37A

LOS ALAMOS, N.M. - The U.S. Department of Energy wants to make sure the United States, if it has to, could quickly crank up its ability to churn out a key nuclear bomb part. The department, in a report this summer to Congress, proposed a $1.2 million contingency plan that would enable the nation to develop, within five years, the ability to build up to 500 plutonium "pits" a year. Pits, about the size of a grapefruit, are radioactive metal spheres at the heart of most nuclear bombs.

Currently, the Department of Energy stockpile stewardship program calls for Los Alamos National Laboratory to develop the capability to build an average of 50 pits per year by 2005. The stewardship program is aimed at making sure the U.S. nuclear arsenal is reliable.

During Cold War production, the department's Rocky Flats plant near Denver built more than 1,000 pits per year.

Nuclear opponents criticized the contingency plan.

"This will only stir up the right wing in Russia to pour in more money to their nuclear weapons complex," said Christopher Paine, a senior researcher at the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington.

Mr. Paine said his organization, which is already challenging the Department of Energy's stewardship program in court, would fight if the department seeks a large expansion of pit production capability.

Mr. Paine accused the Energy Department of "secretly plotting to maintain a very large nuclear weapons stockpile. " "It runs against every one of our treaty commitments," he said.

Greg Mello of the Santa Fe-based **Los Alamos Study Group** said his organization sees "no reason to acquire any additional capability to manufacture plutonium pits - let alone a level that is 10 times DOE's stated plan. " The proposed expanded production, if ever undertaken, probably would not take place at Los Alamos because the lab lacks a facility that is large enough. Instead, the report to Congress said, the work probably would be based at existing facilities at another Department of Ener gy site, such as Savannah River in South Carolina; the Y-12 plant in Tennessee; the Pantex plant in Amarillo; or the Nevada Test Site.

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He also said it is unlikely that the nation ever will need to replace 500 pits in a year.

"I don't know that anyone is actually planning for 500 as much as they're planning for a larger capability in case we have a major problem in stockpile," Mr. Trapp said.

"It's hard to imagine a problem where we would need to replace more than 500 per year. It's just an upper bound on what's conceivable," he said.

Author: Associated Press
Section: NEWS
Page: 37A

LANL: Group Is Confusing Figures

12/5/97

By Ian Hoffman
Journal Staff Report

Arms-control advocates say the price tag of making plutonium pits — the radioactive cores for nuclear weapons — has escalated dramatically in less than two years.

U.S. Department of Energy analysts put a $1.1 billion estimate on pit production in a report to Congress this summer.

That's nearly triple the $312 million estimate that won the job for Los Alamos National Laboratory in 1996. After making demo pits for a two missile warheads and a bomb, the lab plans to start producing fully-certified, "diamond-stamped" warhead and bomb pits in 2001.

"In short, they're milking this for all they can get," said Greg Mello, head of the Los Alamos Study Group, a Santa Fe arms-control organization.

Lab weapons managers charge Mello's group with intentionally mistaking two very different dollar figures.

"The bottom line is they're trying to make an issue out of something that's not an issue," said T.J. Trapp, the lab's chief of weapons-component readiness.

Pits form the heart of a small A-bomb that weapons scientists use as a fission "match" to touch off a thermonuclear explosion. Workers at Rocky Flats turned out the last fully-certified pit in 1989.

Trapp said the latest DOE report to Congress on restarting pit production at Los Alamos entails more projects and more costs than did the 1996 estimates. It includes, for example, $58 million to run the production lines, $1.2 million for a contingency plan to produce up to 10 times as many pits and $253 million for other, related projects.

And some of those costs have grown dramatically.

Producing non-nuclear parts of a pit — namely its beryllium reflector and its braces inside a shell of high explosive — were thought to cost $14.2 million in 1995. Estimates today run eight times higher, at $116.3 million.

But taking those extra costs aside, the cost of merely equipping LANL's plutonium-processing facility to make pits still has grown.

Trapp notes the DOE's 1996 estimate of $312 million neglected inflation, which would boost the estimate to $350 million in 1997 dollars.

"We've always said it would be in the $350 (million) to $450 million range," he said.

The latest comparable figure from DOE's July 1997 report to Congress is $601 million or 70 percent more.

Mello charges the lab with "low-balling" the earlier figures it gave DOE for the 1996 estimates so the lab could get the work — an accusation Trapp vigorously denies.

"That's just plain-out, patently untrue," he said.

DOE analysts relied on those numbers in awarding pit production to Los Alamos and rejecting Savannah River Site's bid to do the work in South Carolina for $488 million. Trapp said Los Alamos and Savannah River Site supplied the same kinds of numbers to DOE so they could be compared fairly.

But Mello suggested on Thursday that the discrepancy between the 1996 and 1997 figures shows lab officials are trying to use pit production to bolster the lab's budget.

"The lab said they can produce 50 pits a year if you just give them $310 million. Now they say they didn't count all these other things, we need another $800 million," Mello said. "It's absurd."

Mello and other activists oppose pit production as unnecessary to maintain the nation's nuclear arsenal.

Lab weapons scientists worry about losing the ability to make pits and later finding out they need to be replaced.

"I think it's absolutely imperative to have that capability in place if we are to maintain our stockpile," Trapp said.

Lab officials protest that they have estimated the costs of pit production honestly and say the costs remain close to their projections.

"We tried to put it in a consistent, up-front way — 'Here's what it costs'," Trapp said.

LANL: Group Is Confusing Pit Figures

from **PAGE 1**

LANL plutonium pit project plagued by cost overruns

By KEITH EASTHOUSE
The New Mexican

An $800 million construction project that would enable Los Alamos National Laboratory to build a key bomb component for weapons in the country's nuclear stockpile by 2005 could get more expensive.

The reason is that the project — begun last year — has already incurred cost overruns of several million dollars. That may force the lab to abandon its plan to upgrade existing facilities and instead construct a brand-new building to house work related to manufacturing plutonium triggers.

The triggers, also called pits, are the radioactive metal spheres at the heart of most nuclear bombs.

Building a new facility could jack up the price of the construction project to close to $1 billion.

"If it turns out we can't use (just existing buildings), it will cost us more money," T.J. Trapp, program manager for nuclear component readiness at the lab, said Thursday.

■ **Official: Plan needed to make more nuclear bomb parts.**
Page A-2

So far, the lab has received about $85 million from the Department of Energy to do the upgrade work, Trapp said.

The purpose of the upgrade work is to enable the lab to produce 50 plutonium pits per year beginning in 2005 under the DOE's "stockpile stewardship" program. The pits would be used to replace components in aging

Please see **LANL,** Page A-2

LANL

Continued from Page A-1

weapons in the country's nuclear stockpile.

The country lost the ability to manufacture plutonium pits of sufficient precision to be used in stockpile bombs when the Rocky Flats plant near Denver closed in 1989 due to environmental and worker safety violations.

The cost overruns at Los Alamos have occurred at the lab's 44-year-old Chemistry, Metallurgy and Research facility. The aged facility has proven more difficult — and hence more costly — to upgrade than the laboratory thought, according to Trapp.

The problems at the CMR building, as it's called, have been compounded as the facility has not been fully operational since August because of problems with worker safety procedures.

Earlier this year, the laboratory analyzed five different upgrade alternatives, ranging in cost from $800 million to $950 million. The lab chose the cheapest alternative, which calls for major upgrades at CMR and at Technical Area 55, the lab's top secret plutonium research facility.

The three most expensive alternatives propose new facility construction at TA-55.

In addition to the extensive upgrades to the CMR building and TA-55, the upgrade plan chosen by the lab calls for:

■ Modernizing the Sigma Complex, where non-nuclear weapons components would be fabricated.

■ Building a 1.5-mile long "transportation corridor" between TA-55 and the CMR building that would be closed to the public.

Trapp said this would entail paving a gravel road.

■ Modifying the Special Nuclear Materials Storage Facility, which has serious construction flaws that date from when it was initially constructed in the 1980s.

There has been some confusion surrounding the cost of the upgrades.

The price of the TA-55 and CMR upgrades was initially said to be $350 million. Thirteen months ago, when the upgrade contract was awarded to construction giant Fluor-Daniels, the price tag was said to be $800 million.

Trapp said the discrepancy was more apparent than real.

"The $350 million was for a piece of the work" related most closely to plutonium pit manufacturing, and did not include all of the upgrades, Trapp said.

Further confusing the issue is a July 1997 DOE report to Congress that lists the cost of the upgrades at $1.12 billion.

The different price estimates led Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group, a Santa Fe organization, to issue a press release Thursday charging that "the cost of establishing plutonium manufacturing work at Los Alamos has tripled."

Trapp said that was inaccurate.

Trapp said Mello was overlooking the 13-month-old announcement of the $800 million Fluor-Daniels contract.

Trapp said Mello was also misinterpreting the $1.12 billion cost estimate that DOE provided to Congress.

That estimate includes costs associated with operating the facilities as they are being upgraded, Trapp said.

Mello said if that's the case, the operating costs ought to have been included all along.

"It seems like the whole thing has been low-balled," Mello said.

Mello also said in his press release that one reason behind the "rapid escalation" in costs was that the lab is developing the ability to manufacture all nuclear weapons components, not just plutonium pits.

That claim flies in the face of the Energy Department's plan — announced almost two years ago — to build replacement parts for bombs at multiple sites, not just at one site.

Trapp said the lab, at the Energy Department's direction, has studied the feasibility of manufacturing uranium "secondaries," another nuclear bomb component.

But he said there is no plan for the lab to actually do such a broad spectrum of work. He said, for example, that to the extent that existing weapons need to be fitted with secondaries, such work would be done at the DOE's Oak Ridge plant in Tennessee — not at Los Alamos.

Trapp said Mello "is confusing planning studies with someone actually doing it."

CORRECTIONS

A workshop for kids on Capoeira Angola, an Afro-Brazilian dance and martial arts form, will be held at 10 a.m. on Saturday at the Tutorial School, 400 Brunn School Road. An incorrect day was listed in Thursday's "Best Bets for Kids" column.

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An environmental study will not be done on the first test shaft for a Santa Fe city and county water diversion project at San Ildefonso Pueblo, but will be done before remaining parts of the project, that will actually divert water, are built, Mike Hamman of Santa Fe's Water Service Division said. A story in Thursday's *New Mexican* reported otherwise.

□□□

An 27-year-old former female employee of Lagarroite Elementary School, 1604 Agua Fria St., is being investigated for failing to deposit an unspecified amount of cash from a cafeteria register into the Santa Fe Public Schools bank account Tuesday. The name of the school was incorrect in a police notes item published in Wednesday's *New Mexican.*

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The New Mexican will correct factual errors in its news stories. Errors should be brought to the attention of the city editor at 986-3035.

LA MONITOR

Lab says LA Study Group misunderstood

12/5/97

Los Alamos Monitor

By STEPHEN T. SHANKLAND
Monitor Managing Editor

An activist group said Thursday that the cost of Los Alamos National Laboratory's program to build plutonium pits for nuclear weapons has more than tripled in the last 13 months — but the lab said the group's analysis is wrong.

The Los Alamos Study Group, a Santa Fe-based anti-nuclear organization, said in a news release that the lab appears to have "low-balled" the pit production cost estimate so the Department of Energy would pick LANL over the Savannah River Site as the location for the work.

Greg Mello, director of the study group, said in the release that the cost rose from $310 million in July 1996 to nearly $1.1 billion in August 1997.

But T.J. Trapp, program manager for nuclear component readiness at the lab, said Mello "is taking several unrelated numbers and associating them with pit manufacturing," Trapp said.

The figure of more than a billion dollars describes several projects, of which the modifications for pit production are a subset, Trapp said. The billion dollars also apparently includes the operating costs (which fund the program) as well as the capital costs (which fund the construction work), Trapp said.

The capital cost of $800 million includes fixing the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Building, fixing the Nuclear Materials Storage Facility, upgrading security systems to protect nuclear materials better, and improving safety features — work the lab must do "independently of whether we're doing pit manufacturing or not," Trapp said.

In addition, the $800 million in capital projects includes $350 million to $450 million in other improvements to nuclear facility infrastructure at the lab that's not directly related to the pit production mission, he said.

The $310-million figure Mello mentioned was used for comparing LANL to Savannah River and didn't include funding for all that's required for the pit production mission, Trapp said.

Instead, the $310-million figure was used to estimate what would be required at LANL that wouldn't be required at the Savannah River Site. Savannah River had a comparable figure of about $460 million that described what would have to be done there that wouldn't have to be done at LANL.

The $310 million figure was listed in the Stockpile Stewardship and Management Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement.

Trapp also attacked other statements in Mello's release.

• The study group said one reason for increasing costs in the Stockpile Stewardship and Management program is "LANL's acquisition of new manufacturing capability, not just for pits but for all the nuclear components of nuclear weapons, a closely-guarded secret until today. The capability to make a complete 'physics package,' as nuclear weapons innards are euphemistically called, duplicates the work of the Y-12 Plant in Tennessee."

(Please see PITS, Page A-8)

PITS

(from Page A-1)

Trapp said the lab always has had a capability to make prototypes of all the physics package, but isn't getting responsibility for manufacturing the "secondaries" (the bomb parts made of uranium and other materials that are responsible for the secondary, or thermonuclear, explosion in a nuclear weapon).

Expanding the LANL manufacturing mission is described in the lab's 1996 report "Nuclear Facilities Master Plan for Stockpile Stewardship and Management Support," the study group said.

Trapp said that in the Stockpile Stewardship and Management environmental analysis, DOE examined the possibility of manufacturing secondaries at LANL, but made the "logical decision" to keep the activity at the Y-12 Plant, where it has been done in the past.

"We are not doing anything on putting in place any capability for making uranium secondaries," Trapp said.

• The study group also said the price tag has increased for establishing the ability to manufacture non-nuclear components, such as the beryllium that reflects neutrons and thereby increases the explosive power of nuclear weapons.

The Non-nuclear Reconfiguration Project was expected to cost $23 million in 1995, but by August 1997, the non-nuclear work was listed at $118 million, the study group said.

Trapp said the study group confused two parts of the work. The $23 million is for construction work, and the $118 million is the operating cost, he said.

FORUM

Cathie Sullivan

LASG Board Member

12/13/97

Reason for Encouragement

There may be reason for encouragement with the appointment of Dr. John Brown to head Los Alamos National Laboratory as the Lab assumes its role in Stockpile Stewardship and Management, the nation's $4.5 billion-per-year, post-Cold War, nuclear weapons program. At a Dec. 4 "get-acquainted" meeting in Santa Fe, Brown, a friendly, direct ("what you see is what you get") man, discussed three priorities many New Mexicans share.

The first is education, or why Johnny, Mary, Jose and Maria probably can't read the words "Stockpile Stewardship." A Santa Fe Schools spokesperson at the meeting used the word "crisis" to describe our 40 percent student-dropout rate. We need a "Student Stewardship Program" to give children the priority we give weapons. It's no stretch to say an educated population would better defend its nation and government than one with a 40 percent dropout rate from school.

Great science serving society has nothing to do with weapons.

The second issue Brown acknowledged was a growing perception of Lab dishonesty and untrustworthiness. I state it more strongly than he did; his words were "credibility problem." Do citizens believe the Lab when it speaks on health, safety and environmental issues? Answer: No. Are we told the truth about Lab programs? Answer: No. Still fresh in my mind are a deputy director's many disclaimers about LANL ever doing plutonium pit (the nuclear heart of nuclear bombs) production. The Lab is becoming the national center for this dangerous and seriously polluting work that irretrievably contaminated Rocky Flats, Colo. Brown spoke forcefully about modeling the behavior he wanted from others. Start with telling the truth.

The third of Brown's encouraging comments concerned the Lab's long-term future. He suggests that if LANL's mission, "reducing the nuclear danger," succeeds, the number of nuclear weapons in the world will decrease over time and with it LANL's role in their support. Currently more than 75 percent of LANL's budget is for work related to weapons. Brown spoke of possible long-term new missions we could be proud of, in the areas of energy and climate. We could stop looking for a fig leaf big enough to hide the moral problems of nuclear weapons.

These three areas — education, a Lab trusted by its employees and the public, and working for less dependence on nuclear weapons — are urgent. With 75 percent of its budget weapons-related, LANL's vision statement, "Science Serving Society," is nonsense. And "science" in its immense scope is ridiculed when Brown says Los Alamos National Lab is the "greatest scientific laboratory in the world." Great science serving society has nothing to do with weapons. But Brown's own comments are very encouraging and he cannot be shackled to the Orwellian mottos of public-relations geniuses of the past. I wish him every success; his new position is of importance to every citizen of the United States. We all need to help this man succeed. ■

Cathie Sullivan is a Santa Fe citizen with a long history of interest in nuclear weapons issues.

Mello states his case

Editor:

Your Dec. 5, 1997, issue contained an article under the mysterious headline "Lab says LA Study Group misunderstood." Most of the article was devoted to TJ. Trapp's disputations of previously published Department of Energy/Los Alamos National Laboratory cost figures for pit production. Dr. Trapp directs the pit production effort in the Nuclear Materials Technology (NMT) Program. It is quite unlikely that DOE published its earlier estimates without his input.

It is disturbing that you attributed the DOE/LANL cost figures to me. My only contribution was to present DOE/LANL's ballooning estimates, with documentation, for your convenience.

In July of 1996, DOE and LANL estimated the total "transition" cost of establishing pit production capacity at LANL to be $312M, plus $30M/year for operations thereafter.

The $312M LANL cost did not include related necessary but so-called "independent" facility upgrades. I and others disputed this at the time, to no avail. The study included — or said it included — "operating costs" in their total "transition cost" (see graph, p. 26, "Stockpile Management Preferred Alternatives Report").

Yet the DOE is now telling Congress that acquiring pit production capacity will cost about $1.1 billion, about three and one half times as much as last year's published numbers.

The increase has three components. The first is the misleading earlier omission of many "independent" projects, which are now finally counted as part of the project. The second is increases in cost for specific projects — the estimated cost of the CMIP itself increased from $300M to $601M, and there was an eight-fold increase in ancillary "non-nuclear" pit production-related costs. The third is a huge increase in the incremental operating costs to be incurred prior to project completion.

It was initially in DOE and LANL's perceived interest to exclude projects from the pit production mission, since those projects would then have required more analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) prior to construction. And inclusion could have adversely affected DOE's current litigation on the stockpile stewardship and management program.

The selection of LANL for the pit mission over the Savannah River Site was predicated on the resulting low estimates.

Massive cost inflation is not unusual for large projects at LANL. According to DOE and LANL sources, the CMR project has increased in estimated cost from $195M (all three phases) to $224M (just the first two phases); the pit-related portion of the non- nuclear reconfiguration has skyrocketed from $14M in 1995 to an estimated $116M today; the Nuclear Materials Storage Facility renovation has increased from $13M in 1992 to $57M today (not counting $19M in 1987 dollars sunk into the original unusable facility); and total DARHT costs have increased from an estimated $53M in 1993 to at least $250M today. Dr. Trapp's organization is heavily involved in three of these four projects.

Finally, and inconsistently, Dr. Trapp claims that many of the costs included in the $1.1 billion are for tasks the lab "must do independently of whether we're doing pit manufacturing or not." The source of this $1.1 billion is a recent DOE report to Congress on the cost of "plutonium pit production and remanufacturing" ONLY....

This situation calls for a careful EXTERNAL investigation. If history is any guide, plans and budgets will change again before the first pit is built.

Monitor
1/9/98

Greg Mello, Director
Los Alamos Study Group
212 E. Marcy St. No. 7
Santa Fe, N.M. 87501

Publication: Jnl Legacy 1995 to July 2005; Date: Jan 22, 1998; Section: Journal North; Page: 68

Edition--Journal North Date--01/22/1998 Page-- 3

Coalition Report Hits Pit Production

Journal Staff and Wire Report

Nuclear weapons production and waste disposal in New Mexico fell among 71 federal projects that public-interest groups denounced Wednesday as wasteful and environmentally damaging.

In their annual "Green Scissors" report, a coalition of 26 environmental groups and taxpayer advocates found $49 billion in federal spending cuts they said also could save the environment.

Corporate and government organizations continue to "bring home the bacon, while the taxpayer gets fried in the pan," said Brian Cohen, campaign coordinator of New Mexico Public Interest Research Group.

The biggest slice of $1.6 billion in savings in and near New Mexico would come from eliminating Los Alamos National Laboratory's plan to make plutonium pits, the grapefruit-sized hearts of nuclear weapons.

The latest report to Congress puts the eventual price tag of pit production at $1.1 billion, the majority for renovating aging labs at LANL to handle the work.

"Green Scissors" authors -- led by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group, Friends of the Earth and Taxpayers for Common Sense -- said the project is unnecessary and poses the danger of plutonium fires and contamination as occurred at the defunct Rocky Flats Site near Denver.

The Los Alamos Study Group in Santa Fe and Physicians for Social Responsibility nominated pit production for the report.

A classified fraction of the 10,000 unused plutonium pits stored in Texas and New Mexico can be used as replacements for the nation's nuclear arsenal of 12,500 weapons, said the study group's Greg Mello.

Weapons scientists concede they have found no problems with weapons pits for their first 20 to 30 years of shelf life. Activists such as Mello argue the government should wait until a clearer need for new pits arises.

"The laboratory has adopted the Orwellian line that if we're just allowed to make more weapons, this will help disarmament. It sounds like an alcoholic," Mello said. "We think it would be far more prudent to wait until there is some need before investing hundreds of millions of dollars in new infrastructure for an arsenal we are required by treaty to downsize and then eliminate."

Also targeted in and near New Mexico:

*The $503 million Animas-La Plata project aimed at settling water-rights claims by the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Indian tribes while supplying water to northwestern New Mexico, the Navajo tribe, the city of Durango, Colo., and more than 50,000 acres of farmland. It involves pumping water from the Animas River in Colorado to a reservoir more than 1,000 feet uphill, then sending it down to the La Plata River before it is used.

*A road-building policy for national forests that largely benefits logging companies. The Forest Service has been reviewing the roads system since last summer, when Assistant Agriculture Secretary James Lyons identified roads as the single biggest cause of ecological damage to national forests.

*The $85 million marketing budget for the proposed Waste Isolation Pilot Plant that would bury plutonium-contaminated waste in the ancient salt beds near Carlsbad. Rather than spending money promoting the program, the money should go for safety and research, NMPIRG's Jeanne Bassett said.

Paper: Albuquerque Tribune, The (NM)
Title: N.M. anti-nuclear groups go nationwide
Date: February 3, 1998

Three New Mexico anti-nuclear groups are among 33 activist groups that have formed a national coalition that will focus attention on the nation's nuclear policies.

"Our concerns cover the entire U.S. nuclear legacy," said Susan Gordon in Seattle, who is director of the organization Alliance for Nuclear Accountability.

Gordon cited the "horrible health effects of uranium mining" in New Mexico and "current schemes to rob the Department of Energy cleanup budget to fund pointless weapons research and production," notably at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

The three New Mexico groups are Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety and the **Los Alamos Study Group**, both in Santa Fe, and the Southwest Research and Information Center in Albuquerque.

They are among 39 groups that earlier this month asked a federal judge to jail Secretary of Energy Federico Pena and two other DOE officials, saying they violated federal environmental laws and court orders.

The groups also asked the court to halt the opening of DOE's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad and fine the department $5 million in punitive damages and $5,000 per day until it complies.

DOE issued a statement contending the groups' claims are without merit. A hearing is scheduled for Feb. 20 in Washington, D.C. DOE plans to open WIPP in May if the Environmental Protection Agency grants a final permit, which is expected.

Apart from supporting the suit, the alliance aims to monitor the DOE's changing nuclear-weapons complex by developing and acting on a "collective agenda."

It will publicly challenge continued research in and production of nuclear weapons at sites such as New Mexico's Los Alamos and Sandia national laboratories.

"The alliance, I think, reflects a new level of organizational maturity on this issue," said Greg Mello of the alliance's **Los Alamos Study Group** in Santa Fe.

Mello said the alliance will "harmonize local interests and concerns into a nationwide policy critique."

He said the alliance's chief asset will be enhancing "communication between groups, these tiny groups that are trying to fight through the labyrinth of the huge DOE bureaucracy and (weapon-complex) documents that describe and prescribe the future of our communities."

One of the alliance's major concerns is the government's plan to dispose of nuclear wastes at WIPP and at Yucca Mountain at the Nevada Test Site in Nevada.

WIPP was cited by alliance spokesman Bob Schaeffer as an example of the alliance's new focus, which is "collective self-interest and the need to work together."

"People in New Mexico can't stop WIPP by themselves," Schaeffer said, noting that nuclear waste is not a New Mexico problem.

He said an alliance campaign in April will try to focus national attention on the issue of transporting nuclear wastes.

Current plans "will involve roads in 44 states, practically every state, and that presents risks nationally," he said.

New Mexico's two nuclear-weapons labs, each of which has an annual budget of about $1 billion, are monitored by the three local organizations in the alliance. The three groups are among the most vocal opponents of WIPP.

The three groups also oppose the expansion at Los Alamos of the capability to manufacture plutonium pits, or triggers, for thermonuclear bombs.

They consider the activity unnecessary in the aftermath of the Cold War, dangerous to workers and area residents and a threat to the environment. DOE contends the work is essential to maintain the nation's warheads.

Meanwhile, the alliance groups complain, Los Alamos and other DOE sites have faced cuts in their programs to clean up environmental hazards from past nuclear-weapon activities.

Several organizations in California similarly monitor programs at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, east of San Francisco.

The nation's other nuclear-weapons lab, Livermore, is where DOE has begun construction on a controversial $1 billion laser intended to simulate nuclear-weapon blasts.

That project and others are being challenged in the court case by the groups, which contend the project and DOE's nuclear-weapon Stockpile Stewardship and Management Program violate the U.S. Environmental Policy Act.

The groups got indirect support last year when several prominent nuclear-weapon scientists told The Albuquerque Tribune they have serious reservations about the laser. Several doubted it can achieve its fundamental scientific goals.

Schaeffer said the formation of the alliance will not affect the suit against the DOE, which will independently continue in Washington, D.C.

The anti-nuclear plaintiffs lost the first round, a motion to get an injunction to stop the Livermore laser. But they filed the contempt motion, at the invitation of the judge, asking the court to hold DOE in contempt for failing to abide by federal environmental law and the court's previous orders in the case.

Last year, Washington, D.C., federal District Judge Stanley Sporkin ordered a thorough DOE analysis of America's nuclear-weapons cleanup program. The coalition, including New Mexico's **Los Alamos Study Group**, claimed "neglect, failure and willful refusal to comply with and obey" Sporkin's order.

There is no chance Pena will be sent to prison, however, said Marc Johnston, deputy DOE general counsel.

"This motion to have the department held in contempt is absolutely without merit. The department has not violated any court order, and we will contest this vigorously," Johnston said from Washington.

Sporkin had urged the parties to negotiate a settlement over DOE's multibillion dollar nuclear cleanup program, which has suffered budget cuts in recent years even as DOE has ramped up budgets for nuclear weapons.

On Jan. 16, DOE informed U.S. Magistrate Alan Kay in Washington, D.C., who had overseen the Washington talks, of the agency's withdrawal. The letter says DOE can't accept the plaintiffs' settlement proposals and that the two sides are so far apart that a counterproposal is pointless.

"Under these circumstances, it does not appear to DOE that it would be fruitful for the court to conduct a settlement conference on January 28, 1998," the letter says.

Last week, the coalition sent its own letter to Kay, complaining about DOE's "abrupt" withdrawal.

The new alliance, which has grown out of the former Military Production Network, is headquartered in Seattle and has a Washington, D.C., office.

The 33 member organizations act as public watchdogs of DOE sites in Colorado, Ohio, Washington, Idaho, California, Nevada, Tennessee, Kentucky, Texas, Massachusetts, Oklahoma and South Carolina.

Two of the organizations are American Indian, based at reservations in Oklahoma. One was formed out of concerns over the nuclear power industry's efforts to gain access to tribal lands for nuclear-waste storage or disposal.

One such effort at the Mescalero Apache reservation in south-central New Mexico failed when it became a contentious political issue within the reservation.

Author: Lawrence Spohn TRIBUNE REPORTER
Page: A5

Lab Chief Promises Revamp

3/20/98

LANL Asking Congress For Construction Funds

BY IAN HOFFMAN
Journal Staff Writer

Plagued by "a systematic problem" of construction delays and cost overruns, Los Alamos National Laboratory is revamping the way it builds everything from labs to offices to computer centers, the lab's chief told a Senate committee in Washington, D.C., on Thursday.

Lab director John C. Browne promised to assemble a panel of outside experts in construction and project management to recommend changes in the lab's work.

"I personally am reviewing the status of our projects at my bimonthly business and operations meetings," Browne told members of a Senate strategic-arms committee.

EDDIE MOORE/FOR THE JOURNAL

WASHINGTON TESTIMONY: Los Alamos National Laboratory director John Browne testified before a Senate strategic arms committee Thursday in Washington, D.C.

The timing of Browne's testimony is crucial: LANL is asking Congress for up to $800 million in new construction money over the next eight years. And its track record on construction has drawn sharp criticism in recent years.

"This problem has resulted in ... cost growth through insufficient institutional oversight and lack of a common project management system," Browne said.

A House committee last year turned aside the lab's request for $15 million to renovate its Chemistry and Metallurgical Research building, where cost overruns have stalled work since last spring.

Committee members pointed out the lab ran through

See **LAB** *on* **PAGE 3**

from **PAGE 1**

its $51.3 million budget for the first part of the renovations and still had untold millions of dollars of work left to do.

The lab and its overseer, the U.S. Department of Energy, are still investigating the project. But investigators said the lab grossly underestimated the amount of expensive electrical work and de-contamination to bring the 1950s-vintage lab building up to modern safety standards.

A recent report by the Defense Nuclear Facilities Board said the U.S. Department of Energy itself suffers from a lack of construction and engineering expertise.

"It's a case of the blind leading the blind on these projects," said Jay Coghlan, a program director for Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, a nuclear watchdog group.

Lab officials now are mulling whether to scale back the CMR renovations to emergency maintenance work and ask Congress for a new nuclear facility capable of handling large quantities of plutonium.

Congress rejected lab plans for a new $385 million plutonium facility in 1990 after environmentalists and peace activists mounted a vigorous campaign against it. They promise more of the same if the lab resurrects the idea.

"The laboratory can look forward to a firestorm of protest if it attempts to build yet another industrial facility for handling plutonium," said Greg Mello of the Santa Fe-based Los Alamos Study Group. "The protests will be local, they will be national and they will be international."

Another project, the Nuclear Materials Storage Facility, never opened due to design flaws. Investigators found, for instance, that highly radioactive, weapons-grade materials would have had to pass through the facility's offices to reach the storage vault. Originally priced at $15 million, fixing NMSF is expected to cost more than $50 million.

Lab plans call for five other multi-million dollar construction or renovation projects over the next few years. Browne said he will name a project manager to run each of them and report directly to top lab executives.

The new external panel will review each project to make sure it fits the lab's needs and can be finished in time, Browne said. He said he will find a chairman for the panel among executives of "our nation's largest industrial project management organizations."

SF anti-nuclear group says DOE planning new weapons

SANTA FE (AP) — An anti-nuclear group is blasting the U.S. Department of Energy over plans for replacing weapons in the nation's aging stockpile, but the DOE says its program meets federal requirements.

The Santa Fe-based Los Alamos Study Group contends a newly declassified 1997 DOE report proves the agency's stockpile stewardship program, aimed at maintaining the arsenal, also is in the business of developing new weapons.

The report reveals "a shocking disregard for U.S. commitments, especially those enshrined in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to end the nuclear arms race," said Greg Mello, director of the watchdog group.

The DOE says its program meets stockpile management guidelines mandated by the 1994 National Defense Authorization Act.

According to that law, the program is meant "to ensure the preservation of the core intellectual and technical competencies of the United States in nuclear weapons, including weapons design, system integration, manufacturing, security, use, control, reliability assessment, and certification."

John Gustafson, a spokesman for Los Alamos National Laboratory, said the report reveals nothing that DOE officials haven't said all along. The lab is involved in the stewardship program.

"The lab is not currently developing new weapons and the stockpile stewardship program has always been clear on the need for eventual replacements of weapon components and even entire weapons systems," he said.

DOE officials in Albuquerque are out of the office until later this week and were not available to comment.

The report to Congress, "Stockpile Stewardship and Management Plan: First Annual Update," spells out plans to gradually replace existing weapons with modified or new ones, develop new nuclear options for emerging threats and maintain the facilities and technology to build new weapons at Cold War levels in case of a national emergency.

The department released a declassified version to a federal court in Washington in a lawsuit that seeks to stop the DOE from producing nuclear weapon triggers at Los Alamos and building a National Ignition Facility in Livermore, Calif. The lawsuit was filed by a consortium of 39 disarmament and environmental organizations, including the Los Alamos Study Group.

(Please see WEAPONS, Page 8)

Monitor 3/21/98

WEAPONS

(from Page 1)

Much of the report remains classified.

Among the items in the declassified version:

- A program to provide a "continuum of warhead design options" to replace warheads on the Navy's submarine fleet and a provision for manufacturing the warheads.
- A lab program to design and replace warheads for existing weapons that will be producible and certifiable without a nuclear test.
- Maintain the capability to resume nuclear testing. President Clinton signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996, committing the United States to a moratorium on testing. A presidential directive requires the DOE to maintain the capability to conduct a nuclear test within 24 to 36 months of a request from the president.

Paper: Washington Post
Title: OUR GROWING NUCLEAR STOCKPILE
Date: April 26, 1998

In his April 2 news story, "Lab to Make More Triggers for H-Bombs," Walter Pincus reprints the Department of Energy's stated reasons for resuming manufacture of plutonium pits ("triggers"): to ensure the "reliability" of the nuclear stockpile and to "prepare a reserve supply." But Mr. Pincus fails to mention that the United States already has a reserve supply of approximately 12,000 plutonium pits -- already tested and certified -- many of which can be reused if needed.

According to DOE and Los Alamos managers, none of these pits has become less reliable with time and will not do so for decades to come.

With its current equipment, Los Alamos can manufacture 10 to 20 new pits per year. To increase this rate to 50 pits per year would cost well in excess of $1 billion, according to DOE's estimate. Worse, this billion-dollar project is described by DOE as merely a "demonstration module" for a facility six to 10 times larger. This year's budget request includes a down payment of $67 million on this unnecessary and dangerous endeavor, the estimated costs of which already have more than tripled.

Those of us who have studied DOE's "stockpile stewardship" program hope that someone in Congress wakes up before signing off on this enormous folly.

MAYA SINHA

Santa Fe, N.M.

The writer is a researcher at the **Los Alamos Study Group**, a disarmament and nuclear weapons policy research group.

Section: OP/ED
Page: C6

NewsBank inc. Access World News

Paper: Santa Fe New Mexican, The (NM)
Title: Main
Date: May 5, 1998

After the end of U.S-Soviet arms race, activists fear new era of proliferation, but scientists say research is the essential to keep nuclear arsenal safe

For anti-nuclear activists like Marylia Kelley, the government's stockpile stewardship program presents a perception problem.

In the 1980s, it was relatively easy to drum up opposition to President Reagan's ``Star Wars'' dream of a space-based nuclear shield against Soviet missiles. In the 1990s, with the Soviet Union gone, the concern about nuclear holocaust has given way to less apocalyptic preoccupations such as El Nino, Microsoft stock and Bill Clinton's sex life.

But Kelley, who heads up the group Tri-Valley Cares out of her small apartment less than a mile from the gates of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, is doing all she can to spread the word: Nothing has changed.

The Cold War may be long gone. Almost 10,000 warheads may have been dismantled. And President Clinton may have signed an international treaty banning nuclear testing.

But the U.S. and Russia still have thousands of nukes pointed at each other. And American nuclear weapons labs like Los Alamos and Sandia in Albuquerque are still coming up with new ways to enhance the country's nuclear arsenal.

``It's a problem perception-wise,'' Kelley says, referring to the widespread public ignorance of the stewardship program and to the fact that one of its central goals is to keep the arsenal in a state of hair-trigger readiness.

``But when we tell people (about the program) they're outraged. They'll say `I thought Livermore was converting (to nonweapons work).'''

That's why it's so hard for people like Kelley to see why nuclear weapons labs like Los Alamos and Sandia in Albuquerque are still working to enhance the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

As with so many other hotly debated issues connected to the Energy Department's stockpile stewardship program, the answer to why nuclear weapons should continue to be refined in the post Cold War-era depends on who's doing the explaining.

To nuclear weapons officials, the continued weapons work is critical to meeting what they say is the main purpose of stewardship: maintaining the safety and reliability of an aging arsenal in the absence of underground testing.

They say it is also crucial to ensuring that the nation maintain a cadre of skilled weapons scientists.

``Who will maintain the weapons if we don't have weapons scientists particularly 30 years from now when we're way beyond testing?'' asked Vic Reis, DOE's man in charge of stewardship.

To nuclear critics, the weapons work is aimed at furthering evolution of the nuclear arsenal and as such flies in the face of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, designed to halt the arms race.

``You can maintain expertise, but stewardship is about enhancing expertise,'' said Christopher Paine of the Natural Resources Defense Council, a Washington, D.C., organization opposed to stewardship.

The issue of ongoing weapons work is perhaps the most fiercely debated aspect of stewardship, the 10-year, $45 billion effort to keep America's nuclear arsenal in a state of readiness.

At the heart of the debate are deep divisions over what is a ``new'' weapon, what constitutes weapons ``development'' and what is the best way to maintain the stockpile as weapons age beyond their design life.

The debate also raises this fundamental question: Should weapons scientists play only a custodial role over the existing stockpile? Or should they be free to make substantial changes, up to and including giving a bomb a new military capability?

A question of semantics

Officials at DOE and the weapons labs adamantly insist they are not developing new nuclear weapons.

What they mean is they don't have any formal orders from the Pentagon to develop new weapons. They also mean they aren't making changes to the nuclear explosive package that gives nuclear bombs their terrifying power.

Significant weapons work that falls outside these definitions is going on, however.

One new, or at least different, weapons system was deployed last year. While its nuclear core is unchanged, its casing has been modified so that it has an earth-penetrating capability. That weapon, the B-61-11, was jointly developed by Los Alamos and Sandia.

Sandia is also working on a follow-up earth penetrator that would have a new guidance system and would soar on wings like a glider after its release from a bomber. The purpose would be to enable a bomber to release the bomb from farther away, thus increasing crew safety.

Finally, Los Alamos and Sandia are seeking to craft a possible replacement for warheads carried by nuclear submarines, the first full-scale development of a nuclear weapon design since the end of the Cold War.

Part of this project involves a Los Alamos effort to determine whether a new warhead design can be introduced into the arsenal without undergoing full-scale nuclear testing.

Los Alamos spokesman Jim Danneskiold said this study is consistent with stewardship's goal of maintaining the arsenal.

``To do stewardship, the labs have to evaluate aging weapons components. At some point, aging effects may render components substantially less worthy of confidence than some sort of potential replacement.''

Nuclear critics warn that all of these projects threaten to render the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty moot which could lead other countries to decide that ratification is not in their national interest. India has already said it won't join the test ban because it believes the United States is flouting it.

``The CTBT is what keeps other countries from fielding nuclear weapons and if the world believes the treaty has become illegitimate because we are evading it, then other countries will not ratify it,'' said Greg Mello of the **Los Alamos Study Group**, a Santa Fe organization that has uncovered details about the weapons work.

Stewardship, CTBT: Can we have both?

The new weapons research is a particularly sensitive issue at the moment because the U.S. Senate may debate the CTBT later this year.

By banning nuclear explosive tests the only proven way of demonstrating that a bomb works the treaty seeks to halt the further development of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear critics say the weapons work clearly undermines this goal.

Last August, NRDC said in a report called End Run that the stewardship program including the weapons work ``consciously seeks to render the CTBT a less effective constraint on the development and qualitative improvement of nuclear weapons than it otherwise would be.''

Paine of NRDC said President Clinton's goal of having a robust stewardship program and a CTBT are fundamentally incompatible.

``The Clinton administration wants to have it both ways.'' Paine said in an interview. ``They want to have a CTBT and have the weapons program continue full-steam ahead.''

It is the stated policy of the White House, the DOE and even the military that no new nuclear weapons are needed in the post Cold War era.

Laboratory and DOE officials say they are not developing new weapons, just modifying existing ones. Such modifications are critical, the officials say, since without testing, weapons systems must remain in the arsenal beyond their design life.

As a result, the weapons work doesn't undermine the treaty, officials say, but actually makes U.S. participation in the treaty possible. The work enables the weapons labs to meet Clinton's requirement of a healthy nuclear deterrent under a test ban.

``The CTBT has a number of objectives, but the U.S. has not said that one of them is to reduce the reliability of its own weapons,'' said Kent Johnson, a top weapons scientist at Livermore.

Reis said the claim that ongoing weapons work undermines the CTBT is backward.

``This will allow us to do the CTBT,'' he said.

He said criticism about the weapons work is exaggerated because regardless of what the weapons labs do, a test ban can't help but significantly slow development work.

Stewardship supporters also say criticism ignores the fact that without testing the weapons labs would never certify new designs and the military would never deploy them.

To counter the claim that the weapons labs would never certify an untested weapon, activists point to the Los Alamos project to develop a plutonium ``pit,'' or trigger, that could be certified without underground testing.

Labs and new weapons designs

This debate is particularly heated partly because the labs and the DOE have been reticent about the weapons development work.

That's where the anti-nuclear groups stepped in.

By piecing together information, Mello's study group brought the B-61-11 story to light. Mello's group also made an issue of the labs' work in crafting a replacement warhead for the nuclear submarine fleet.

More information came to light with the release last year of DOE's Green Book, which along with a newer version of the same document made public in April provides the most detail yet on planned weapons projects. The existence of this document was known to very few outside classified government circles until late 1996, when NRDC obtained the minutes of an August 1996 meeting that mentioned it.

Despite DOE talk of openness a buzzword under former Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary information has trickled out about the weapons work. That has led to charges that the weapons labs are initiating weapons development projects on their own in the absence of Defense Department requirements.

There have been a couple of indications of this. One came in 1996, when an Internet document indicated that scientists at Los Alamos, Sandia and Livermore were engaged in new nuclear weapons work work that was not being requested by the Pentagon.

According to the document, ``concepts under consideration range in complexity from relatively minor modifications in the components of existing weapons to major changes in warhead subsystems, or to entirely new physics designs for a proposed or candidate weapon.''

In other words, despite the stated policy against new weapons work, the labs were apparently dreaming up new designs just in case anyone was interested.

After the media found out about the document, DOE pulled it off the Internet.

Another indication that the labs are proceeding with weapons work is a letter last fall from Reis to the directors of the three weapons labs. The letter reminds the directors that they are under a statutory requirement to submit ``weapons concepts and significant warhead modifications or development concepts'' to a joint Defense Department and Energy Department panel.

When asked why Reis would write such a letter if the labs weren't working on new weapons projects, high-ranking DOE officials said in March that the purpose of the letter was merely to remind the labs of the statute. They insisted that the letter was not written in response to any specific lab projects.

Activists like Paine and Mello are skeptical. They believe the letter was written after Sandia pushed too far with its glide bomb project which they say did not originally have a specific DOD request to justify it.

Earl Whiteman, an official at DOE's Albuquerque Operations Office, said Sandia scientists merely did a ``conceptual study'' on the glide bomb ``which is what we pay them to do.''

Whiteman said the glide bomb project is presently dormant.

``There is no planned activity beyond the work (done) a year or two ago,'' Whiteman said.

Finding the center

While anti-nuclear activists and the weapons community are clearly polarized on the issue of ongoing weapons work, some observers are staking out some middle ground.

Ray Kidder, a retired weapons scientist from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California and a prominent critic of the stewardship program, draws the line at giving a weapon a new military capability.

``If you're talking about providing new military characteristics, then I would say that's not within the intent of the CTBT,'' Kidder said.

Nevertheless, Kidder said he's willing to accept the B61 earth-penetrating modification because work on that began before Clinton signed the CTBT in September 1996.

``That was sort of grandfathered in,'' Kidder said.

Kidder said that as long as no new military capability goes along with it, he supports a plan to install a new kind of high explosive in Trident warheads to make them less accident-prone.

Kidder said that designing weapons and putting them on the shelf if needed could be beneficial. He said such work tends to be challenging and interesting and would allow weapons designers to exercise their skills and increase the chances that the weapons labs can attract a new generation of talented scientists.

``It would keep people on board doing things, chewing on a challenging problem, not just spinning their wheels. And I think it would help the labs get some pretty good people to come'' on board in the future, Kidder said.

Continuing the fight

Meantime, Marylia Kelley isn't going to back off in her long fight to curb or even eliminate weapons work at Livermore the lab legendary physicist Edward Teller helped create in the 1950s to serve as a rival weapons lab to Los Alamos.

Maybe her fierce opposition has to do with the fact that when her 30-year-old son was a boy back in the late '70s, he used to play in an arroyo that Kelley later learned carried contaminated storm water from the lab when it rained.

Or maybe it's because Kelley now knows that a park that her boy used to romp in contains elevated levels of plutonium in the top 2 inches of dirt.

Or maybe it's not personal at all. Maybe it's simply that she says continuing to design ``new'' types of nuclear weapons when the United States is the only superpower is so obviously unneeded so obviously an effort to keep big money flowing to the weapons labs.

``I'd love to see stewardship defeated and then have the debate be on how many weapons do you want in the stockpile and how reliable do you want them to be,'' said Kelley, working from the kitchen of her apartment.

``Right now, we almost can't have that debate because stewardship is such an aggressive program.''

Author: KEITH EASTHOUSE, with photos by Clyde Mueller
Section: Main
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DOE Eyes New Lab Weapons Facility

Renovations Costing More Than Expected

By Ian Hoffman
Journal Staff Report

9/1/98

A squat fortress of a nuclear chemistry lab — the largest building at Los Alamos National Laboratory — could be mothballed inside of 12 years and replaced by a new lab at unknown cost.

Government nuclear-weapons managers are thinking about trying to sell Congress on a less ambitious version of a controversial 1984 proposal, the $350 million Special Nuclear Materials Laboratory.

"It was a Cold War-era facility," said Earl Whiteman, a DOE weapons official in Albuquerque. Today, "the workload for it isn't near what it was when we had the Cold War going. But these are capabilities we need to support our (weapons) mission, and nowhere else can provide them."

Lab executives resurrected the idea this spring for a new "nuclear chemistry and materials building" after a $225 million fix-up of the Chemistry and Metallurgical Research Building ran into dire troubles.

Built in the early 1950s, the CMR building is a blockish, 550,000-square-foot monument of Cold War weapons research, then the largest construction project in New Mexico.

Its specialty today is actinide chemistry, the analysis of plutonium, uranium and other materials in nuclear-weapons parts. CMR scientists also fashion uranium weapons parts and perform a smattering of other research on nuclear waste and energy.

Workers renovating CMR last year found the 46-year-old building was more contaminated, its electrical and safety systems more antiquated, than originally suspected. The result: a $15 million overrun in the renovation's first phase, mostly replacing old electrical circuits.

"The difficulties of identifying the bui ing's deficiencies and estimating the cost overcome them ... has drawn serious cri cism," reported the lab's Actinide Resear Quarterly, "and essentially a vote of 'no co fidence' that actinide work within the buil ing can be done safely with long-term co sistency."

Having spent almost $60 million, the l and the U.S. Department of Energy la

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year halted the work, intended to keep the building working 25 or 30 more years.

"We're saying, are we best off trying to put everything into this facility that's almost 50 years old or should we do something different?" said Whiteman, assistant manager for technology and site programs at DOE's Albuquerque Operations Office.

"The thing's almost as old as I am. You just wonder, does it really make sense?" Whiteman said.

Lab executives in March proposed the government close the building in 10-12 years. It was part of a plan to join operations of CMR and Technical Area 55, home of the lab's top-security plutonium facility, under new management.

The plan was driven partly by a series of safety violations at CMR, the worst leading to a November 1996 explosion that wrecked a lab room. Lab managers later shut down the building's operations for almost six months. The latest proposal calls on the DOE to give the building more time than the rest of the laboratory to come into compliance with some safety requirements.

Lab critics discovered the proposal recently through a Freedom of Information Act request.

"The DOE has been telling Congress since 1990 that this upgrade (of CMR) is required for the whole building," said Greg Mello, head of the Los Alamos Study Group in Santa Fe. "So the DOE has been singing one song to Congress for this entire decade, and now the DOE says they haven't made the decision about what to do with this building."

The DOE's contractors admit they did not foresee the full amount of work required for the renovations.

Activists also doubt the need for a new building to replace CMR.

"The questions the prudent taxpayer might be asking is how many millions more will be pumped into this building before it is abandoned and how many millions more will be pumped into the next building for dubious purposes," Mello said.

The DOE's Whiteman said the actinide chemistry related to weapons work at the Chemistry and Metallurgical Research building is unique.

"There are capabilities that exist at CMR that don't exist anywhere else in the United States," he said.

No decision on CMR is likely until at least December, when the lab is to deliver detailed studies to the government on each safety system in the building and on the potential for earthquakes nearby — a factor that could boost the cost of continued renovations.

If the Energy Department chooses to operate the building only for 10 or 12 more years, Whiteman said, "we would be spending significantly less on upgrading it. I can't give you an estimate, but it would be significantly less."

The new nuclear chemistry and materials research lab, if built, probably would be sited near or at Technical Area 55, closer to the plutonium facility. The CMR building at Technical Area 3 ultimately would be decontaminated and possibly demolished.

"If we were to leave CMR, we would need to clean up behind ourselves," Whiteman said.

Paper: Santa Fe New Mexican, The (NM)
Title: LANL may build new chemistry building
Date: September 2, 1998

Officials at Los Alamos National Laboratory and the Department of Energy are exploring the possibility of building a new nuclear chemistry building at the lab.

The new building which would replace the 45-year-old Chemistry and Metallurgial Research Building would not be built anytime soon. DOE and lab officials are talking about it becoming operational no sooner than 10 to 15 years from now.

The lab is in the middle of upgrading the CMR building so that it can play a role in the lab's new mission of building plutonium ``pits'' or triggers to replace aging pits in the nation's nuclear stockpile.

The original plan was to upgrade CMR at a cost of $225 million. But the project has been plagued with difficulties, leading lab and DOE officials to consider carrying out a smaller upgrade to keep CMR functional for the next 10 year and then turning to a new facility.

Lab officials had previously indicated that building a new facility would be a preferable option than pouring large amounts of money into sprucing up the aging CMR building.

Information that the lab and DOE are actively considering a new facility is contained in government documents from this past spring that were uncovered by a Freedom of Information Act request filed by the **Los Alamos Study Group**, a Santa Fe activist organization.

The new facility is reminiscent of a controversial lab proposal in the 1980s to build a ``Special Nuclear Materials Laboratory.'' The proposal was eventually shelved by Congress as being too expensive.

In an interview last week, DOE official Earl Whiteman said the new facility would be a scaled-down version of the nuclear materials lab.

Whiteman also said that lab and DOE officials are gathering information about the CMR facility including its ability to withstand earthquakes and will probably make a decision in about six months about the extent to which CMR will be upgraded.

If a decision is made to eventually go with a new building, a formal proposal to Congress for funding is probably about three to four years away, Whiteman said.

Author: BY KEITH EASTHOUSE The New Mexican
Section: Local
Page: B-3

Legislative committee OKs $4.3 billion for nuclear weapons-testing program

▶ *The money will provide nearly all the money the DOE needs to operate its stockpile stewardship program*

By KEITH EASTHOUSE
The New Mexican

The U.S. Department of Energy will get 95 percent of what it wanted in the upcoming federal fiscal year for its ambitious stockpile stewardship nuclear weapons program.

A House-Senate conference committee on Friday approved $4.3 billion in 1999 funding for stewardship. That's about $200 million less than the DOE requested, but it's about $100 million above current funding.

President Clinton is expected to approve the funding levels for stewardship, an ambitious effort to maintain the nation's nuclear arsenal in a state of readiness in the absence of underground testing.

"The bulk of this bill is designated to keep our nuclear stockpile safe and secure in this era of underground test bans. Los Alamos and Sandia share in the national responsibility for keeping our aging stockpile safe and reliable, and as such will share in using the funding in this bill," Domenici said in a prepared statement.

The continued strong funding of the stewardship program came as no surprise to nuclear critics.

"Last spring my feeling was that Congress would use an X-acto knife rather than an axe (on the stewardship budget). That's about what happened," said David Culp of Plutonium Challenge, a Washington D.C.-based group.

In terms of Los Alamos National Laboratory, the X-acto knife did some damage to a couple of stewardship-related projects.

The ongoing effort to upgrade the 45-year-old Chemistry and Metallurgy Research building so that it can play a major role in supporting work related to manufacturing plutonium triggers for nuclear bombs received a major setback.

Instead of the $16 million that the lab had been hoping for in 1999, only $5 million will be made available for the upgrades. The funding reduction is a reflection of congressional impatience with a project that has been plagued by delays due to poor lab management of the project and the unexpected difficulty of sprucing up the aged facility.

Another project — this one to renovate the nuclear materials storage facility — also was targeted for cuts. Instead of getting $9.2 million for 1999, the lab will receive only $3.8 million — less than half of what was requested.

On a more positive note, the flagship stewardship facility at the lab — the $260 million Dual Axis Radiographic Hydrotest Facility, a giant X-ray camera — is being fully funded.

So is the National Ignition Facility, a football-field sized laser complex being built at Los Alamos' sister lab, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California.

Culp predicted that funding for stewardship will also be secure in the 2000 federal fiscal year, which begins next October. He said that Republicans are planning on boosting defense spending next year. With money less tight than it was this year, stewardship is more likely to receive full funding.

Nonetheless, Culp said that Congress has made it clear that it won't blindly give DOE what it wants — $4.5 billion for 10 years.

DOE officials "are going to have to come up here every year and make the case" for stewardship programs, Culp said.

* We have written + briefed staff on these projects, apparently with some success.

Won't Make Enough Nuke Triggers

12/12/98

By Ian Hoffman
Journal Staff Writer

Even with $1.1 billion to work with, U.S. nuclear weaponeers won't be making enough plutonium triggers to insure the nation's arsenal forever against possible breakdown, a new congressional report found.

So far, however, U.S. Department of Energy weapons scientists haven't seen the need for a larger and vastly more expensive weapons manufacturing plant such as the government operated during the Cold War.

Some Pentagon officials worry small-scale production of plutonium triggers at Los Alamos National Laboratory might not be enough to preserve the nuclear stockpile against failure, Congressional investigators with General Accounting Office say in a recent report.

Yet a multibillion-dollar research program of experimental machines, non-nuclear explosions and the world's most powerful supercomputers has not shown such a breakdown is imminent.

Scientists remain confident the grapefruit-sized plutonium triggers — the tiny A-bombs at the heart of modern thermonuclear weapons — will work as designed for at least 30 years and perhaps longer.

"We don't have any reason to believe through measured evidence that these weapons components are going to fall apart," said Dana Christensen, a chemical engineer and deputy director of the Nuclear Materials Technology Division at LANL.

"But these materials are live materials: They're radioactive. So we know at some point they will (fall apart,)" Christensen said.

The GAO report exposes divisions over caretaking of U.S. nuclear weapons between the civilian agency that builds them and some of the military officials responsible for the nation's nuclear deterrent.

The Energy Department stopped making its so-called "war reserve" plutonium triggers, or pits, at the Rocky Flats plant near Denver in 1989. Some defense officials would like to see a plant nearly as large operating again as soon as possible, the GAO report stated.

Original plans called for Los

Report: U.S. Won't Make Enough Nuke Triggers

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Alamos in 2005 to start making as many as 50 war-reserve pits a year. But the Energy Department since has scaled those plans back, to 20 pits a year by 2007.

A team at Los Alamos has so far fashioned two demonstration pits for the W88 warhead, one of two nuclear tips on U.S. submarine-launched missiles. Building the first war-reserve pit is slated for 2001. These pits must be certified to highly precise specifications — "diamond stamped," in weapons lingo.

"Our job is not to put in a major production line but to re-establish the capability," Christensen said Friday. "We've demonstrated we can cast and machine very close to war reserve specification."

The Energy Department is considering a plan to build a much larger plutonium-pit factory, able to turn out 150-500 pits a year, at either its Pantex plant near Amarillo or its Savannah River Site near Aiken, S.C. No cost estimates are available for such a factory, but they likely will run to several billion dollars.

Aiken is the hometown of Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who requested the GAO study of pit manufacturing.

"There's nothing wrong with the pits we have," said Greg Mello, a Santa Fe disarmament activist. The GAO report "is nothing more than Strom Thurmond trying to get a bigger billion-dollar program for Savannah River."

The GAO report found that some Pentagon officials prefer building the factory now but acknowledge they don't know what its production level should be without further research by Energy Department scientists.

The DOE plans are awaiting research primarily on the shelf life of plutonium pits and high explosives, as well as surrounding components whose nature is classified, the GAO report said.

It is also unclear what number of pits might be needed. The U.S. nuclear arsenal, roughly 9,000 fielded weapons, could be reduced by half or more through treaty negotiations.

To account for those uncertainties, the Energy Department is engaged in a massive research program to detect and predict problems in aging nuclear weapons. At the same time, workers at Los Alamos are relearning the roughly 100 steps and processes to make war-reserve pits.

"My personal opinion is the (Energy) Department is hosting a very responsible program," Christensen said. "Those pieces of information are necessary to determine what the ultimate (pit manufacturing) capacity should be."

Bingaman Seeks Funds For Design of Weapons Facility

4/15/1999

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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Bingaman Seeks Funds for Design of Weapons Facility

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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

4/15/1999

By BARBARA FERRY
The New Mexican

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

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 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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LANL

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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.

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Weapons Projects May Move

John Fleck and Ian Hoffman Journal Staff Writers

Plan Balances Load At Los Alamos, Other Labs

The Department of Energy wants to shift key pieces of its nuclear weapons workload from Los Alamos National Laboratory to bolster a sister lab in California.

The proposal moves some work from Los Alamos to Nevada, shifts a large amount of plutonium and weapons maintenance now done at Los Alamos to Lawrence Livermore in California, and calls for a big new research complex at Sandia National Laboratories outside Albuquerque.

The moves, collectively called the "Mega Strategy," are aimed at balancing the workload at the department's major research and testing sites to ensure the right mix of skills is available in the future to maintain the nuclear stockpile, said Energy Department Deputy Assistant Secretary Gil Weigand, who is in charge of weapons research and development.

The Livermore moves are aimed at giving scientists there hands-on responsibility for nuclear weapons, rather than simply weapons-related basic research, Weigand said in an interview Thursday.

"You need a challenging workload where they are really touching the bomb," he said.

Weigand says the move is necessary to bolster the number of experienced U.S. weapons workers.

Nuclear-disarmament advocates see the changes as a worrisome retrenchment of U.S. nuclear-weapons work. The proposal seeks a dramatic increase in explosive testing with plutonium and plutonium-like metals.

"It's clearly a huge expansion of stockpile stewardship and beyond any scenario of what might be needed to keep the arsenal in a safe condition," said Jackie Cabasso, executive director of the Western States Legal Foundation in Oakland, Calif.

"For Los Alamos, this will mean more explosive tests with plutonium and more secret work at the plutonium facility," said Jay Coghlan, program director for Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, a watchdog group in Santa Fe.

The critics also say other nations will read this spreading around of weapons work as the latest sign that the United States wants to keep its weapons indefinitely, rather than moving toward a smaller arsenal.

"For other countries, expanding activities at the Nevada Test Site is really offensive. It really flies in the face of what a test ban is all about," said John Burroughs, executive director of the Lawyers

Committee on Nuclear Policy in New York.

With no change from the current path, Lawrence Livermore's dwindling hands-on work on nuclear devices jeopardizes its role in the nuclear weapons complex, said Bob Peurifoy, a retired Sandia National Laboratories nuclear weapons designer.

"If you go down that road, you're going to close Lawrence Livermore as a device lab," said Peurifoy, who frequently works as an adviser to the Energy Department and who has been briefed on the proposed changes. "They've got to have something to put their hands on."

Details of the proposal have leaked out of the department in pieces over the last month. But Weigand's interview Thursday marks the first public acknowledgement by the department of the details and scope of the plan.

Weigand said the plan, being developed as part of the Department of Energy's Fiscal Year 2001 budget proposal, would ensure the labs are able to do needed refurbishment and modification of U.S. nuclear warheads after the turn of the century.

Few if any people would be moved when the work is moved, Weigand said.

The Nevada Test Site would be the new home of Atlas, a $48.3 million machine under assembly at Los Alamos that would smash soda can-sized targets with massive jolts of electricity, yielding enormous pressures and temperatures needed to study how nuclear weapons work.

Weigand said moving Atlas to Nevada would free up Los Alamos to focus on hydrodynamic radiography, a crucial technique used by nuclear weapons designers. Scientists fire X-rays into exploding shells of high explosive and plutonium-like metals. That lets scientists check and refine the operation of "primaries," the initial A-bomb triggers for thermonuclear weapons. Weigand wants a more aggressive schedule of the tests at Los Alamos.

Part of the tests involve a top-secret project, code-named Appaloosa. They employ an exotic metal, plutonium-242, that can be imploded in bomb shapes without undergoing an explosive nuclear chain reaction. This gives scientists X-ray movies of full-scale weapons tests that never go "nuclear."

Moving plutonium work to Livermore will give Los Alamos more space at its plutonium facility for the Appaloosa work.

At the same time, Los Alamos would build one of the world's 10 most powerful proton accelerators to test out a new kind of hydrodynamic radiography. Scientists want more and higher quality pictures at more angles of exploding triggers. For a future machine, the Advanced Hydrotest Facility, they think the answer might be to surround triggers in multiple proton beams and X-rays, all delivering split-second pictures. Weapons designers can use these pictures as they do today, to verify the accuracy of weapons codes that simulate an exploding nuclear weapon.

But critics inside and outside of the weapons labs wonder about the prudence and the cost of transferring work away from those most experienced at it.

"Moving Los Alamos work to Nevada doesn't make any sense from cost or technical standpoint," said Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group, a disarmament organization in Santa Fe. "It's creating a new lab in the desert."

Weigand would not say how much the moves would cost, but said the amount was "not significant." And he argues that weapons designers at Los Alamos are being stretched thin by their responsibility for maintaining weapons.

Department of Energy policy calls for the lab that designed a weapon system to be responsible for regularly taking a few out of the stockpile and tearing them apart, looking for signs of deterioration.

Los Alamos is responsible for five nuclear warhead types, while Livermore is responsible for three.

Weigand said the workload was "exhausting" the Los Alamos weapons designers. As a result, he's proposing shifting responsibility for one of the weapons, the W80 cruise missile warhead, to Livermore.

Sandia National Laboratories benefits from the proposal.

No major programs are leaving the Albuquerque lab, which is responsible for the electronic systems and other non-nuclear components in nuclear weapons.

But Sandia will get a $300 million complex of buildings to centralize research into computer circuits and microscopic machines.

DOE proposal

The Department of Energy's proposal to shift workload among its nuclear weapons research and testing sites:

* Gives an unknown portion of Los Alamos' job inspecting plutonium pits to its sister lab, Lawrence Livermore in Livermore, Calif. This $7.9 million-a-year job, called pit surveillance, is a linchpin of maintaining aging U.S. nuclear weapons. Pits are hollow, egg-shaped shells of radioactive plutonium the size of a grapefruit. When crushed by high explosives, they become tiny A-bombs that touch off the hydrogen fuel in thermonuclear weapons. Scientists fear plutonium and its high-explosive shell is vulnerable to aging. DOE wants to send pit surveillance to Livermore to give that lab more "hands-on" work with plutonium components. At Los Alamos, about 30 people inspect about 15 pits a year.

* Sends two Los Alamos research machines to Nevada. The prize is Atlas, a $48.5 million machine that uses electrical power equivalent to 100,000 lightning bolts to crush a soda can-size "target." Los Alamos has spent $2 million so far on Atlas, mostly refurbishing a building. Under the proposal, Atlas' 80-foot ring of capacitors would have to be disassembled at Los Alamos, reassembled and tested at the Nevada Test Site at unknown additional cost. Atlas targets typically lead, tungsten and copper are stand-ins for plutonium and uranium in weapons.

* Makes Los Alamos the nation's center for hydrodynamic radiography. It's a technique for nuclear weapons designers to refine and check the operation of nuclear weapons by detonating mock weapons, with inert materials substituted for their explosive plutonium. X-rays of the blasts allow scientists to study the results.

* Builds one of the world's 10 most powerful proton accelerators at Los Alamos to try out a new technique in weapons testing. The new accelerator at Los Alamos would operate at 50 Giga electron volts, about 60 times the power of the lab's current accelerator. Scientists want to try shooting the proton beam through exploding nuclear primaries from multiple angles in a future machine called the Advanced Hydrotest Facility.

* Builds a $300 million microelectronics complex at Sandia to develop components for refurbishing aging U.S. nuclear weapons.

Nation should reconsider nuclear treaty, report says

1/16/00

By KRISTEN DAVENPORT
The New Mexican

A report issued Friday that urges the federal government to reconsider the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty also says the United States needs more nuclear pits — the explosive, radioactive hearts of nuclear bombs — that would likely be manufactured at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Retired Gen. John M. Shalikashvili, who served as head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1993 to 1998, issued the results of his study, saying that for the sake of slowing down the worldwide nuclear-arms race, the United States must reconsider the treaty. The U.S. Senate voted in 1999 against the treaty 51-48, far short of the two-thirds approval needed to ratify it.

Shalikashvili's report says President-elect Bush should consider the merits of the treaty, although during the campaign, Bush opposed it. However, Bush also promised to continue the U.S. ban on nuclear testing.

But Shalikashvili's report also said the United States needs to do more to maintain its current stockpile of nuclear weapons. The country should add policies that could help make sure the treaty does its job — stopping other countries from doing nuclear testing, the report said.

The United States should increase intelligence efforts and construct a new factory to manufacture plutonium pits. The pits, made of plutonium, tritium and other materials, trigger a nuclear explosion.

The U.S. Department of Energy and lab planning documents have indicated for several years that LANL would likely end up being the national center for production of nuclear pits. The facility would probably be built at Technical Area 55, at the core of lab property.

In November, LANL management unveiled its new beryllium processing facility. Beryllium is a toxic metal that can cause fatal lung disease — and is also used in nuclear pits. The metal is used to reflect neutrons back into the fissioning core of the nuclear bomb.

Anti-nuclear activists worry that a pit-manufacturing facility in Los Alamos would put New Mexicans at greater risk of contamination because more radioactive material would be handled at the lab.

The Los Alamos Study Group put up a billboard on Interstate 25 last month suggesting that Los Alamos might soon be home to a pit-production facility: "Nuclear-weapons production — here. It's the pits."

But Shalikashvili and others say putting more money into pit production and maintaining weapons the United States already has in reserve through the U.S. Stockpile Stewardship program might be one way to persuade the Senate to ratify the treaty.

Nuke Report Vexes Activists

Group Fears LANL Will Become Warhead Producer

1/6/00

By Jennifer McKee
Journal Staff Writer

Local activists fear Los Alamos National Laboratory could be the new home for a potential warhead plant alluded to in a State Department report released Friday.

Retired Gen. John Shalikashvili, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was tapped last year to review the failed Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by Presiden Clinton and Secretary of State Madeline Albright. H released his report Friday.

While much of his findings centered around the global spread of nuclear weapons, a small portion of the report focused on maintaining the nation's existing — and aging — supply of nuclear weapons, also known as "the stockpile."

Request to ratify

Clinton urges the Senate to address the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty A8

"The National Nuclear Security Administration (a semi-autonomous arm of the Department of Energy) should make a decision as soon as possible about the need for a large scale plutonium pit remanufacturing facility," the general wrote.

Plutonium pits are the nuclear guts of a warhead and contain radioactive plutonium, which is known to decay over time. The United States currently has no manufacturing plant for nuclear bombs. Los Alamos National Lab has been designated as the official source of new or remanufactured pits, said lab spokesman Jim Danneskiold, although the lab hasn't built a weapons-ready pit in the four years since DOE officials christened it the nation's new pit center.

Greg Mello, of the Santa Fe-based Los Alamos Study Group, said the report all but points to Los Alamos as the site of any new larger-scale pit plant.

"That's been DOE's constant plan for the last eight years," said Mello, chairman of the lab watchdog group.

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Nuclear Ban Treaty Report Worries Activists

from **PAGE 1**

He pointed to reports from the DOE's Albuquerque Operations Office that call for an additional $500 million over the next 15 years for new buildings and facilities earmarked for expanded pit production.

He's vowed to oppose the growth tooth and nail.

"We will fight pit production at any level, other than simple maintenance of the technology, with all means at our disposal," Mello said. "The northern New Mexico community has fought this in the past."

But according to Danneskiold, Mello needn't arm himself just yet. True, Danneskiold said, Los Alamos is the only source of new pits in the country right now. But the lab was charged only with maintaining the know-how and technology to make new nuclear weapons, not the full-scale rebuilding of the nation's nuclear weapons. Under the grandest projections, Los Alamos scientists will only be making 50 new pits a year, he said, and so far they haven't made a single one fit to be implanted in the nose of a warhead.

"There have never been any plans for large-scale pit manufacturing at Los Alamos," Danneskiold said.

Another anti-nuclear activist agreed.

Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch of Northern New Mexico, also based in Santa Fe, said Friday a pit plant on the mesa is the least of his fears.

More upsetting in Shalikashvili's report, Coghlan said, was the general's argument for both the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which would forbid nuclear testing among member nations, and the need for new or remanufactured pits, which are part of the national Stockpile Stewardship Program. Stockpile stewardship, by rebuilding and making slight changes to the weapons, violates the 30-year-old Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, Coghlan said.

DOE Seeks More Cash To Cover Nuke Costs

Officials Cite Aging Weapons Factories

By John Fleck
Journal Staff Writer

2/8/00

Maintaining the aging U.S. nuclear arsenal is more costly than earlier believed, Energy Department officials acknowledged Monday in asking for a significant budget increase next year.

In laying out a $4.6 billion spending proposal for next year, they acknowledged they need to funnel more money into their aging nuclear-weapons factories to keep them open and running.

The spending plan is 6 percent above this year's budget.

Energy Secretary Bill Richardson said as recently as December, during an Albuquerque news conference, that $4.5 billion a year would be sufficient to pay for the labs and factories responsible for maintaining the U.S. arsenal.

In a news conference Monday, Richardson acknowledged that problems found in a program review last fall — aging factories, a loss of skilled workers and pressure from the Defense Department to meet an ambitious schedule for refurbishing weapons — means the budget has to go up.

The request for a $273 million budget increase calls for more money for massive research computers at the weapons labs to simulate nuclear-weapons blasts, and an increase in spending on manufacturing plutonium weapon parts at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Despite the increase, however, it might not be enough to do all the work required, Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., said Monday.

Domenici, who usually leads Senate deliberations about the department's budget, said during a news

See **DOE** *on* **PAGE A4**

DOE Seeks Funds To Cover Nuke Costs

from **PAGE A1**

conference Monday he will hold hearings to find out what programs within the department were "shortchanged" in the department's budget request.

Critics disagree.

The budget is twice as much as necessary to simply maintain old weapons, said Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group, a Santa Fe anti-nuclear group.

The U.S. government should be thinking about reducing the budget and getting rid of nuclear weapons, not increasing spending on them, Mello said in an interview Monday.

"This kind of budget assumes that nuclear weapons have continued legitimacy," Mello said.

Officials at Sandia National Laboratories are "encouraged" by preliminary analysis suggesting the request calls for a $53 million increase in the labs' budget next year, said spokesman Larry Perrine.

But Perrine said it's still not clear if job cuts will be needed this year at the nuclear-weapons research center because of budget problems.

Sandia officials said in December that as many as 500 jobs might have to be cut. Negotiations with DOE officials over the budget situation continue.

A Los Alamos spokesman declined comment.

Referring to a review of the nuclear-weapons program completed last fall, Richardson said money is needed to upgrade the nuclear-weapons factories that refurbish and maintain aging U.S. nuclear weapons.

Speaking at a Washington, D.C., news conference, Richardson also called for additional spending to retain skilled workers in the U.S. nuclear-weapons complex.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BUDGET REVIEW: Senate Budget Committee Chairman Pete Domenici, R-N.M., responds to President Clinton's fiscal year 2001 budget during a Capitol Hill news conference Monday.

The preliminary budget calls for the department to spend $1.34 billion next year at Los Alamos National Laboratory, up 7 percent.

Sandia's Energy Department budget would increase by 5 percent to $1.06 billion.

Among significant items included for the labs:

- A 54 percent increase — $38 million — for manufacturing plutonium nuclear-weapon cores, work that's done primarily at Los Alamos.
- As much as $5 million for Sandia for design of a new building to house researchers developing a new generation of tiny components for use in nuclear weapons.
- A 20 percent increase — $80 million — in the department's high-performance computing program. That includes money for a new computer at Los Alamos four times faster than the current world speed record-holder.
- The end to a Los Alamos effort to use a powerful particle accelerator to make radioactive tritium for U.S. nuclear weapons.
- A 26 percent increase, to $116 million, for the nuclear-weapons transportation group based at the department's Albuquerque Operations Office.

Taps Sound for LANL Facility

Clinton Budget Sets 10-Year Deadline

2/19/00

By Ian Hoffman
Journal Staff Writer

Tucked into the Clinton administration budget is an early epitaph for one of the world's largest nuclear chemistry labs: A final dose of renovation funds, plus money to design its replacement — a 21st century weapons plutonium lab.

Together, those moves are likely to raise a debate on the future of the nation's work with plutonium in an era of uncertainty over the size of the nation's nuclear arsenal and tepid interest in nuclear power.

For now, Clinton's budget sets a 10-year deadline on weapons research at Los Alamos National Laboratory's hulking Chemistry and Metallurgy Research building, a Cold War workhorse that at 550,000 square feet was the largest construction project in early 1950s New Mexico.

Since 1992, the CMR building has undergone a dribble of renovations originally aimed at keeping it running for a quarter century more. The $224 million project crashed in 1997, frustrated by safety mishaps, mismanagement and more contamination and outdated electrical systems than expected. A final nail in CMR's coffin came last year when geologists reported an earthquake fault under one of the building's wings.

"For a 50-year-old building, we think we're better off upgrading it for the next decade and (to) start getting out of it," said Earl Whiteman, assistant manager for technology and site programs at the U.S. Department of Energy's Albuquerque Operations Office.

The president's latest budget request seeks $13 million to finish a scaled-back version of the upgrades, with an end total of $128 million. The revised renovations got a boost recently when DOE executives removed CMR from their watch list of troubled, high-profile construction projects.

Eliminated in the renovations are a refurbished vault for weapons materials, plus new structures to shore the building up against earthquakes and to give stronger guaran-

See **TAPS** *on* **PAGE 3**

Taps Sound for Nuke Chemistry Lab

from **PAGE 1**

tees against the release of plutonium in event of an accident.

Weapons executives say the slimmed-down project should make CMR safe enough to perform its core mission — analytical chemistry on plutonium and other weapons materials — until 2010.

By then, weapons executives in New Mexico want a new lab in place. The DOE is seeking an additional $5 million next year for a rough, first design of what they're calling a CMR replacement building.

The new lab is likely to cost hundreds of millions of dollars, Whiteman said, and would be built inside the top-security perimeter at Los Alamos' Technical Area 55, home to the nation's most comprehensive plant for work with bomb-quantities of plutonium. The plutonium facility, PF4, inherited the job of fashioning the watermelon-shaped plutonium triggers or "pits" for nuclear weapons from the defunct Rocky Flats site near Boulder, Colo.

It's unclear what the new lab at TA-55 will look like, however, or everything it will do. Much of CMR itself appears to be unused, but nuclear-disarmament advocates who scrutinize the building admit they don't really know much of the work performed there.

"This whole project to upgrade CMR has never been transparent because the things that go on inside are unknown and have not been accurately described to the public," said Greg Mello, head of the Los Alamos Study Group in Santa Fe. "We need to have full disclosure of what's going on there and a truly independent audit of the upgrades made available to the public."

Managers of the U.S. nuclear-weapons program in New Mexico say the new lab is needed primarily to perform chemical analyses as a process check on the manufacture and aging of weapons parts, chiefly plutonium pits.

Lab officials complain, however, that they need more room for all of the plutonium work they are assigned. PF4 workers, for example, crack open old pits to study aging effects. They research ways to purify aged plutonium and to mix plutonium with uranium to make experimental nuclear-reactor fuel. They also make plutonium-powered batteries for NASA space probes and undersea instruments. PF4 also is likely to play a role in research on using particle accelerators to "burn" nuclear waste.

DOE executives will consider moving some of those jobs to the new lab as part of its conceptual design, expected to take at least 18 months.

Of shifting work to the CMR replacement lab, the DOE's Whiteman said "maybe yes, maybe no."

"Certainly if you're going to all of the expense of constructing new plutonium floor space, adding more floor space is not all that more expensive."

Disarmament advocates suggest Los Alamos executives created their own space problems at PF4 by taking on too much plutonium work to compete with strictly weapons-related work.

"It's the ambitions of the nuclear-materials program at Los Alamos that is driving this new, bigger facility," said Mello. "We don't really need a new facility. We have the plutonium facility we need if we don't undertake a suite of new plutonium missions that crowd one another out."

Similar arguments persuaded Congress in 1990 to end Los Alamos' six-year campaign for a new, $350 million Special Nuclear Materials Laboratory. The push for the new lab is likely to trigger renewed debate inside the DOE and in Congress over what U.S. weapons scientists need. That, in turn, is premised on the size and types of weapons in the nation's arsenal, as well as demands for new research on nuclear power.

Whatever emerges in those debates, DOE officials know they must mount a rigorous campaign to prove the new lab's worth.

"Building a new nuclear facility is damn expensive," Whiteman said. "So in any scenario we have to have our act together. We have to convince people we know what we're doing and we can build it for whatever cost we're projecting. I think there's continuing support (in Congress) for a nuclear security mission at Los Alamos, but we're not crazy enough to think it's going to be easy."

Weapons Plan Attacked

Assembly Without Testing Revised

2/24/2000

BY IAN HOFFMAN
Journal Staff Writer

For the first time in more than a decade, the White House signaled in its budget the nation's intent eventually to manufacture wholly new first stages of thermonuclear weapons, without test-exploding them.

Fashioning untested new designs of such a major nuclear-weapons component would carry the nation afield of current U.S. nuclear policy, as well as cut against the advice of senior advisers on weapons science.

Arms-control advocates quickly denounced the move as a perilous flirtation with a renewed arms race. It was also wrong, according to the U.S. nuclear weapons executives.

U.S. Energy Department officials backpedaled furiously last week after a reporter drew attention to their own budget request, which set as a goal the building of an automated nuclear-weapons factory to make both existing and "new-design pits, without underground testing."

"It's in error," said Robin Staffin, senior adviser to Energy Secretary Bill Richardson.

DOE officials edited the phrase "new-design" out of their budget last week, substituting the words "replacement weapons pits."

That, too, left room for speculation. As of Wednesday night, they were working on a third version calling for production of "replacement pits for stockpiled (existing) warheads."

"There is no change in policy relative to the design or fabrication of new warheads and associated plutonium pits," DOE's acting weapons chief, Brig. Gen. Thomas Gioconda, said on Wednesday.

Pits are hollow, football-shaped plutonium shells about as big around as a grapefruit. Crushed by high explosives, it becomes a tiny A-bomb that is a match to fire up the power of suns, the second thermonuclear stage that gives H-bombs their punch.

Of the roughly 4,000 parts in a modern U.S. nuclear weapon, it is the radioactive plutonium pit and related parts that many weapons scientists regard as the most sensitive component. Its design and manufacture is as much an art as a feat of physics and engineering. Get the pit wrong, the entire weapon can fizzle. Traditionally, weapons executives have said they would never send a significantly redesigned pit into the U.S. nuclear arsenal untested by a full-blown detonation, which is prohibited by presidential order.

"If you cannot test, you cannot develop new warheads," former

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2/24/2000

Weapons Plan Draws Fire

from **PAGE 1**

Assistant Defense Secretary Harold Smith said in 1996. "That is almost the 11th Commandment as given to Moses on Mount Sinai."

At Los Alamos, plutonium workers are making the first replicas of weapons pits since a 1989 FBI raid closed down the Rocky Flats site outside Golden, Colo. Lab officials declined to comment on the DOE's budget item, but lab spokesman Jim Danneskiold said, "The laboratory has no intention to introduce new-design pits into the stockpile or to introduce any new-design component without underground testing."

Lab director John C. Browne confirmed Wednesday: "Going to anything that would be considered a major new feature, I would be very uncomfortable certifying that without underground (nuclear) testing."

For DOE, correcting its budget misstatement took a delicate touch, because the Energy Department and its weapons labs since 1995 have been designing weapons that are new in several regards.

Changing nuclear weapons without testing seeds doubt that they will operate as designed, and critics of the DOE's weapons program argue this doubt could eventually lead the United States back to nuclear testing.

As part of the Submarine Warhead Protection Program, the U.S. Navy asked Sandia labs to change the fuzing of the W76 submarine-launched warhead so it will detonate near the ground, as opposed to its original airburst design. The change gives the W76 a new targeting capability, for destroying hardened military structures such as missile silos.

At the same time, Los Alamos and Livermore national labs are working on replacements for the Navy's W88 warhead, launched by submarine on the Trident D5 missile.

Livermore's design would recycle the pit from a defunct but well-tested warhead. Los Alamos' W88 replacement would use a new and untested pit. It adds new safety features such as a fire-resistant shell around the plutonium and "insensitive" high explosive that resists detonation in a fire. Both features mark significant design changes that typically require full nuclear testing.

"Design skill exercises fall far short of a weapon development program. There are no requirements for new warheads, and there are no requirements to manufacture new design warheads — period — that has been, and is, our policy and program."

BRIG. GEN. THOMAS GIOCONDA, DOE'S ACTING WEAPONS CHIEF

DOE executives say the new designs are intended simply to hone the skills of weapons lab physicists and keep them in practice. The Energy Department is actually under orders since 1994 not to make new warheads.

"Design skill exercises fall far short of a weapon development program," DOE's Gioconda said. "There are no requirements for new warheads, and there are no requirements to manufacture new design warheads — period — that has been, and is, our policy and program."

Yet the DOE's published policy in 1997 stated: "Nuclear weapons in the enduring stockpile will eventually be replaced. (New system development may be needed even to maintain today's military characteristics.) This work is anticipated to begin around 2010."

Changing nuclear weapons without testing can introduce doubt that they will operate as designed, and critics of the DOE's weapons program argue this doubt could eventually lead the United States back to nuclear testing.

"Once you change them, you're departing from the nuclear testing program of the past and introducing new factors into the stockpile," said Greg Mello, head of the Los Alamos Study Group, a disarmament organization in Santa Fe. "You're decreasing confidence in the stockpile, and you're addicting to ever increasing funding" of the nuclear-weapons program.

While the Navy and the Air Force have not requested the actual manufacture of new nuclear weapons, Energy Department officials say they cannot rule out the possibility of having to make new weapons in the future.

"We didn't say we're never going to do that," said a senior DOE weapons executive. "I can't tell what's going to happen 10 years from now. And if there were (a need to make a new weapon), we would want to be able to respond to it in a timely manner ... It is a hypothetical situation that could become a reality down the road."

Arms-control advocates say they suspect the DOE's original budget statement flirted too close to honesty and are likely to alarm other nations.

"These hairsplitters in the Pentagon and the DOE think they've made a fine point," said Chris Paine, a senior weapons analyst for the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington, D.C. "But for the Chinese and the Russians, who are planning 10 years out, when you read something like that you don't find it very reassuring."

U.S. Nuclear Stockpile Plans Draw Scrutiny

Ours was the "pull quote" in this article.

By Walter Pincus
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday , April 24, 2000 ; A02

While U.S. and Russian negotiators work on a new treaty to sharply reduce strategic nuclear weapons, the Navy is upgrading a 20-year-old submarine-launched warhead to enable it to destroy any remaining super-hardened Russian missile silos, according to government officials and private analysts.

More than 2,000 of the aging W-76 warheads will soon be going through the Energy Department's service-life extension program to be put back in submarines beginning in 2005.

Each warhead now has a destructive power more than three times greater than that of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. After they are refurbished with new arming, fusing and firing systems, the W-76 warheads will have a greater destructive effect on their buried, reinforced targets than when they first went to sea in 1977.

As the number of strategic land- and sub-based intercontinental ballistic missiles is reduced, "the U.S. must maintain the number of hard-target killers we have on alert," a senior Pentagon officer with responsibility for nuclear weapons said recently. Upgrading the W-76 warheads is in line with that need, he said.

At a conference on the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in New York this week, officials expect delegates from the signatory countries to raise questions about the upgrading of the U.S. stockpile. The delegates will review the records of Russia and the United States in moving toward elimination of nuclear weapons, as envisioned by the 1968 treaty.

Although the United States and Russia have both ratified START II (strategic arms reduction treaty) and are working on START III, both nations are expected to draw criticism from other signatory countries for not disarming fast enough and for keeping stockpiles of thousands of warheads.

The Russian decision to store rather than destroy 20,000 tactical nuclear weapons it has withdrawn from deployment will be a subject of concern at the New York conference. Nations in Asia and Europe, where such weapons could be used, are particularly critical of Russia's refusal to destroy the battlefield nuclear weapons. Then-President Mikhail Gorbachev took the weapons out of deployment in Eastern Europe in response to the unilateral withdrawal of U.S. tactical weapons from Europe and Asia.

Delegates to the conference are also expected to complain about U.S. plans to refurbish and upgrade its 6,000 deployed strategic warheads, such as the W-76, and Washington's intention to maintain in an "inactive reserve" weapons withdrawn from deployment when START II's limit of 3,500 warheads goes into effect.

Questions will also be raised about Washington's "war reserve" of 4,000 plutonium triggers, taken from dismantled weapons, which could be converted into nuclear warheads within a year. Triggers from U.S. tactical weapons withdrawn from Europe in 1991 are in that reserve.

Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright is to speak to the New York conference and release a report defending the U.S. approach to disarmament. State Department spokesman James P. Rubin told reporters Thursday that "the United States has led the way amongst the nuclear powers in trying to reverse the nuclear arms race."

The START III negotiations, which got underway in Geneva last week, are based on an agreement reached in Helsinki in 1997 between President Clinton and Boris Yeltsin, then Russian president. The two leaders not only agreed to reduce deployed warheads to between 2,000 and 2,500, but also to take steps to destroy "strategic nuclear warheads."

Russia plans to make an issue of U.S. stockpile practices based on the Helsinki agreement, according to government sources. The Russians believe one flaw in START II was that it allowed the United States to store excess warheads rather than destroy them, according to Alexander Pikayev, an arms expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

U.S. stockpile practices have drawn little attention on Capitol Hill or from the public at large.

"Despite its potential adverse effects on . . . arms control and disarmament efforts, there has been no public or congressional debate over upgrading warheads or the gratuitous modification and novel design of nuclear explosives," said Greg Mello, director of the Los Alamos Study Group, in a recent article about the W-76 upgrade in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.

Congressional testimony on the fiscal 2001 budget infrequently touched on the nation's strategic nuclear weapons program, which costs roughly $30 billion a year, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Buried in testimony of Brig. Gen. Thomas F. Gioconda, the acting director of the Energy Department's National Nuclear Security Administration, is the one mention of the W-76--in a list of three deployed warheads that will be refurbished. The main thrust of Gioconda's testimony was to assure members of Congress that U.S. weapons would still work, not that they would be more effective.

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Nuke Report Vexes Activists

Jennifer McKee Journal Staff Writer

Group Fears LANL Will Become Warhead Producer

Local activists fear Los Alamos National Laboratory could be the new home for a potential warhead plant alluded to in a State Department report released Friday.

Retired Gen. John Shalikashvili, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was tapped last year to review the failed Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeline Albright. He released his report Friday.

While much of his findings centered around the global spread of nuclear weapons, a small portion of the report focused on maintaining the nation's existing and aging supply of nuclear weapons, also known as "the stockpile."

"The National Nuclear Security Administration (a semi-autonomous arm of the Department of Energy) should make a decision as soon as possible about the need for a large scale plutonium pit remanufacturing facility," the general wrote.

Plutonium pits are the nuclear guts of a warhead and contain radioactive plutonium, which is known to decay over time. The United States currently has no manufacturing plant for nuclear bombs. Los Alamos National Lab has been designated as the official source of new or remanufactured pits, said lab spokesman Jim Danneskiold, although the lab hasn't built a weapons-ready pit in the four years since DOE officials christened it the nation's new pit center.

Greg Mello, of the Santa Fe-based Los Alamos Study Group, said the report all but points to Los Alamos as the site of any new larger-scale pit plant.

"That's been DOE's constant plan for the last eight years," said Mello, chairman of the lab watchdog group.

He pointed to reports from the DOE's Albuquerque Operations Office that call for an additional $500 million over the next 15 years for new buildings and facilities earmarked for expanded pit production.

He's vowed to oppose the growth tooth and nail.

"We will fight pit production at any level, other than simple maintenance of the technology, with all means at our disposal," Mello said. "The northern New Mexico community has fought this in the past."

But according to Danneskiold, Mello needn't arm himself just yet. True, Danneskiold said, Los Alamos is the only source of new pits in the country right now. But the lab was charged only with maintaining the know-how and technology to make new nuclear weapons, not the full-scale rebuilding of the nation's

nuclear weapons. Under the grandest projections, Los Alamos scientists will only be making 50 new pits a year, he said, and so far they haven't made a single one fit to be implanted in the nose of a warhead.

"There have never been any plans for large-scale pit manufacturing at Los Alamos," Danneskiold said.

Another anti-nuclear activist agreed.

Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch of Northern New Mexico, also based in Santa Fe, said Friday a pit plant on the mesa is the least of his fears.

More upsetting in Shalikashvili's report, Coghlan said, was the general's argument for both the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which would forbid nuclear testing among member nations, and the need for new or remanufactured pits, which are part of the national Stockpile Stewardship Program. Stockpile stewardship, by rebuilding and making slight changes to the weapons, violates the 30-year-old Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, Coghlan said.

Proposed Budget Protested

Domenici Vows To Up Lab Funds

4/10/01

By Jennifer McKee
Journal Staff Writer

The White House's proposed federal budget ignited both head scratching and criticism in northern New Mexico on Monday as officials and activists waded through the tome to see what President Bush wants to spend on federal projects here.

"The budget request is wholly inadequate," said Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., referring to a cut in funding for plutonium pits at Los Alamos National Laboratory. "Quite frankly, I'll work to see that it does not stand. It simply does not come close to supporting the requirements for pit production and certification work at LANL."

More or less

President Bush's $1.96 trillion federal budget proposal has some positives and negatives for New Mexico
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Domenici estimated the program needs another $150 million above the Bush administration's proposal.

Bush sent his $1.96 trillion budget spending plan to Congress on Monday. The document outlines his administration's proposed spending for every federal agency. In northern New Mexico, that means funding for everything from the Santa Fe Indian School to Los Alamos lab.

The document is far from written in stone. Both houses of Congress will likely produce compromise budget resolutions after the spring recess.

Nonetheless, Bush's plan attracted much attention in northern New Mexico.

On the less contentious side, the plan calls for $4.5 million for the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, $375,000 more than last year. The plan also allocates money to purchase 860 acres on the Taos

Budget Draws Protests

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Valley Overlook as part of the Bureau of Land Management's $4 million Land Acquisition Program.

It slates $23.2 million for the first phase of rebuilding the Santa Fe Indian School, a boarding and day school for about 1,000 Native American students run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The plan also calls for transferring the existing school — a smattering of historic adobe buildings on Cerrillos Road — to the 19 Pueblos of New Mexico, according to Hal Schultz, assistant superintendent of the Indian school.

An independent study finished last spring showed that fixing up the aging building would cost more than $50 million, while building the campus anew would cost roughly $38 million.

Bush's proposed spending for the school falls far short of that, but according to Domenici, this is only the first phase of rebuilding.

"We've built plenty of schools for this kind of money and they're pretty good schools," said Nedra Darling, a BIA spokeswoman.

Perhaps the most heated part of the budget was the Department of Energy's roll-out.

New Mexico's senators attacked the proposal, which calls for an estimated $312 million less spending in New Mexico than last year and cuts at various programs throughout the agency.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., said the budget "sends a very disturbing message about how the president views" the labs.

Domenici said the budget has "some serious deficiencies" and has already co-sponsored two amendments to the Senate budget resolution that would tack on an additional $900 million for DOE defense program spending and $469 million for science research at national labs.

The budget calls for little over $1.4 billion for Los Alamos lab, a decrease of $281 million from last year. That number may be deceiving. The budget also beefs up funding of the National Nuclear Security Administration by $281 million. The administration is a semiautonomous arm of the DOE that now oversees some work at the Los Alamos lab.

Lab spokesman John Gustafson said it's too early in the budget process and too soon after Bush's enormous budget volume was released to say exactly how the lab might end up financially next year.

"There's a long process ahead and it's too premature to speculate on any of that," he said.

Activists didn't hesitate.

According to Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch of New Mexico, the budget is long on weapons and short on environmental cleanup.

"It's basically a budget for the weaponeers of Los Alamos," he said, pointing out that DOE calls for spending an extra $230 million for weapons with almost half of that to be spent at Los Alamos, while the lab's environmental cleanup budget was cut by $15 million to just over $75 million. In explaining the cut, the DOE's budget reads, the "net decrease reflects a shift toward higher priority activities."

"To me, that's weapons," Coghlan said.

Joni Arends, waste program manager for Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, also zeroed in on the cleanup cuts.

"For every dollar increase in stockpile stewardship, there should be a similar dollar for cleanup," she said. "What is national security if we don't have our health."

Similarly, Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group said the budget focuses sharply on weapons.

"More weapons, less science," he said.

Sen. Seeks To Restore Funding for Nuke Pits

4/24/01

By Jennifer McKee
Journal Staff Writer

The Bush administration's federal budget will leave our country out of pits, not in the pits, according to Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M.

And that's a bad thing.

A pit, in this case, is the softball-sized plutonium orb inside every nuclear weapon in the nation's stockpile. Pits cause a nuclear explosion; without them, no nuclear weapon would work.

The United States has not built a new pit since 1989, and some scientists fear the aging pits may not work as planned. To ensure the reliability of nuclear weapons as well as maintain a work force with the knowledge to build a pit, the Energy Department launched a campaign several years ago of building replacement pits in small quantities.

Los Alamos National Lab was designated the nation's new pit production facility.

So far, scientists at the lab have yet to build a certified pit, one that passes rigorous standards and can be placed in an existing weapon.

Thanks to cuts in the latest DOE budget, Domenici said the lab never will.

"This budget puts off the certification and delivery of a pit to the military indefinitely," the senator said last week.

The proposed DOE budget cuts funding for pit production at Los Alamos to $129 million, down from

See **DOMENICI** *on* **PAGE 3**

Domenici Urges Funding for Nuke Pits

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$145 million this fiscal year.

Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, during a visit to the lab last week, said the cuts will not throw the department off its goal of building a certifiable pit by 2003, DOE's self-imposed pit deadline.

According to Domenici, there's a difference between a "certifiable pit," one that is built and could be certified, and a "certified pit," or one that is ready to be delivered to the military and placed into a nuclear weapon.

While the department may produce a certifiable pit by 2003, the DOE's proposed budget cuts render any real-life usable pits a pipe dream for the foreseeable future.

"The budget request is totally inadequate," the senator said. "Under an earlier plan, a new, certified pit was to be delivered to the military in 2001."

That obviously didn't happen, and according to Domenici, the DOE's proposed budget, released earlier this month, "includes no commitment on certification."

He estimates Congress must add another $148 million to the pit budget if DOE expects to have a certified, ready-to-use pit delivered to the military by 2009.

Abraham said during his Los Alamos visit last week that he takes seriously the importance of pit production, but added that while Domenici was one of his best friends when the two served in the Senate together, Domenici "needs to give us a little time" to figure out the Energy Department ropes.

Domenici is already pushing to expand the DOE budget by almost $1.4 billion.

Some say DOE doesn't need all that money to make a pit. Greg Mello, of the Los Alamos Study Group, a lab watchdog organization based in Santa Fe, said many countries routinely crank out pits for a fraction of what the United States has already spent with little result.

"Ask the North Koreans," Mello said, referring to that nation's young nuclear weapons program. "I bet they can make a pit."

Paper: Seattle Times, The (WA)
Title: Modernizing U.S. nuclear weapons to cost millions
Author: Jonathan S. Landay
Date: June 1, 2001
Section: News
Page: A8

THE ENERGY Department says that unless it gets more money to renovate the nation's aging nuclear-weapons facilities, it may not be able to certify the U.S. arsenal without resuming underground tests.

WASHINGTON--Although President Bush is promising deep cuts in the U.S. nuclear arsenal, his administration also is considering a six-year plan that could exceed $2 billion to renovate and improve the nation's aging nuclear-weapons laboratories, assembly plants and testing facilities.

Officials who manage the Department of Energy's (DOE) Stockpile Stewardship Program, which maintains the country's estimated 10,500 nuclear weapons, say they need the money to fix crumbling buildings, install modern equipment and attract a new generation of nuclear scientists.

Critics oppose the new spending, charging the program is bloated by mismanagement and cost overruns and is really intended to design new nuclear weapons. DOE and laboratory officials deny those allegations.

Stockpile Stewardship uses computer simulation and other experimental methods to monitor nuclear weapons to make sure they remain safe and will still work as designed as they age.

Warheads periodically are taken apart and checked for corrosion and other problems, and defective parts are replaced. U.S. nuclear warheads usually last about 18 years. The oldest is 30.

Instead of underground testing

The program is used in place of underground nuclear testing. The United States declared a moratorium on nuclear-test explosions in 1992. Every year since then, the DOE has certified the nuclear arsenal as reliable, but its managers say unless they get more money for renovations, they may not be able to continue certifying the arsenal without resuming underground tests.

"My confidence in our ability to maintain the reliability of the weapons in our stockpile without nuclear testing is being impacted by several trends that we see," John Browne, the director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, told Congress in April.

The weapons are "not aging gracefully," and the government doesn't have the modern facilities and equipment it needs to renovate them and make replacement parts, he said.

DOE officials who oversee Stockpile Stewardship refused to reveal the overall cost of their six-year plan to renovate the nuclear-weapons complex, but they said it would cost $300 million the first year and $500 million a year for the last several years.

It's costing $5 billion to maintain U.S. nuclear weapons this year, $1 billion more than originally estimated because of cost overruns and delays. The administration is seeking $5.3 billion for 2002.

Mounting problems

In congressional testimony and in interviews, DOE and laboratory officials said the stockpile program is threatened by mounting problems at three national laboratories, Los Alamos and Sandia in New Mexico and Lawrence Livermore in California.

They also said the nation's underground nuclear-test site in Nevada and the four plants where U.S. nuclear warheads are assembled and serviced or components are made--Pantex near Amarillo, Texas; the Savannah River Site near

Augusta, Ga.; the Kansas City Plant in Kansas City, Mo.; and the Y-12 plant at Oak Ridge, Tenn.--need to replace old buildings, unsafe work spaces and obsolete or inoperative equipment.

For example:

** At the Pantex Plant, where nuclear warheads are assembled and disassembled, leaks in roofs sometimes have forced technicians to stop work and cover some warheads with plastic bags, said Dennis Ruddy, president of BWXT Pantex, the contractor that runs the plant.

** At the Y-12 plant, built during World War II as part of the Manhattan Project, which produced the world's first atomic bomb, chunks of roof fall out so often that workers wear hard hats, said John Mitchell of BWXT, which also runs the Tennessee plant.

** At Los Alamos, the birthplace of the world's first nuclear weapons, radioactive waste pipes leak and must be wrapped in plastic to prevent spills and contamination, said Gen. John Gordon, the head of the National Nuclear Security Administration, the DOE agency that oversees U.S. nuclear-weapons programs.

The United States already is spending more every year on average to maintain its nuclear arsenal than it did during the Cold War, according to a study by the Brookings Institution, an independent Washington think tank.

The United States spent an average of $4 billion a year in 2001 dollars throughout the 50-year Cold War to build and maintain a much larger nuclear arsenal, according to the Brookings study, "Atomic Audit."

Warheads contain as many as 6,000 parts--made of metal, plastic and other materials--and must be monitored for corrosion, decay and problems caused by age and exposure to radioactivity.

Moreover, plutonium, the warheads' explosive fuel, grows brittle with age, raising concerns that aging explosive assemblies may not perform as expected.

Some experts, such as Greg Mello of the **Los Alamos Study Project**, a private group that monitors the nuclear-weapons programs, say plutonium remains effective for more than 100 years. Others say the DOE's own studies suggest it lasts for 60 to 100 years.

The annual cost of the Stockpile Stewardship Program is probably twice what's needed, said Robert Civiak, a physicist who worked in the White House budget office for 10 years monitoring nuclear-weapons spending.

"If you want to maintain existing weapons, then all you need to do is focus on the existing stockpile program, in which they take apart 10 to 12 weapons a year and fix problems that they find," Civiak said. "They are not focusing on their program. They are focusing on pushing the envelope on the development of nuclear weapons."

Author: Jonathan S. Landay
Section: News
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Aging Nuclear Weapons Get New Lease on Life

LINK DESIGNER: Sandia National Laboratories nuclear weapon designer Carl Vanecek holds an example of a "strong link," part of a nuclear weapon designed to keep it from going off accidentally. Vanecek is working on designs for new strong links, part of a long-term effort to refurbish weapons in the U.S. stockpile.

AARON WILSON/JOURNAL

■ *Stockpile program examines arms to see what components need replacing*

BY JOHN FLECK
Journal Staff Writer

The little metal box Carl Vanecek holds in his hand is no ordinary combination lock.

Since the 1970s, devices like these have stood between a safely stored U.S. nuclear weapon and accidental Armageddon.

As long as there are nuclear weapons in the stockpile, Vanecek, a Sandia National Laboratories nuclear weapons designer, is committed to making sure they are safe.

"We take our job of developing safety components particularly seriously," Vanecek said in a recent interview.

But the weapons are aging, and the U.S. government has no plans to build new bombs and warheads.

They are like a garage full of old cars, parked for 20 or more years but expected to run the first time they are called upon.

Now, instead of their 20-year design lifetime, military planners are talking about keeping them around for another 25 or more years.

"The stockpile we have is the stockpile we're going to continue to have indefinitely," said Larry Witt, director of Los Alamos National Laboratory's stockpile systems program.

So Vanecek and his colleagues at U.S. nuclear weapons laboratories are redesigning weapons from the inside out.

Piece by piece, they are examining every component inside U.S. warheads, figuring out what pieces are aging unacceptably, and designing replacements.

They are part of the Department of Energy's Stockpile Life Extension Program. Working with the Pentagon and teams at U.S. nuclear weapons plants, they plan to gradually rebuild the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

Key nuclear parts, like the plutonium at the weapons' hearts, are not likely to change, the weaponeers say. But many other components, from electronic systems to plastic parts, might

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Aging Nuclear Weapons Get New Lease on Life

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eed to be replaced as their materi-ls decay.

"Nuclear weapons do age," said teve Goodrum, who is heading the ffort for the Energy Department's lbuquerque Operations Office. They're aging gracefully, but at ome point in time refurbishment is equired."

Lab and energy department offi-ials say no serious problems aused by aging have yet been ound. But they nevertheless elieve they have to start the refur-ishment work now for two reasons.

First, the cadre of weapons esigners with the expertise needed o start working on the job is aging.

Officials would like to begin work ow on redesigning components so he veterans who designed the orig-nal parts can pass on their accumu-ated wisdom to new recruits.

"The newest weapons are 20 ears old," said Dave Larson, one of he senior managers of Sandia's /eapons program. "These people re approaching retirement."

Second, it is a massive job.

"That's going to be an effort that's oing to require decades," Witt said.

A tinkerer's dream

Carl Vanecek is the sort of tinker-er who likes to take apart toys to see how they work.

That makes his little metal box a tinkerer's dream.

Called a "strong link," it is one piece of a chain of components used to detonate a nuclear weapon.

Its purpose is simple: Feed in the correct firing code, and it starts the sequence of steps required to explode the bomb.

Feed it the wrong code, or damage it in an accident, and it blocks the bomb from going off.

"A weapon never goes off when it's not supposed to," Larson said.

In testing, Sandia engineers burn them in horrendous fires and smash them in vicious crashes to make sure that in an accident the circuit needed to fire the bomb will not be completed.

Inside, the device is the most complex combination lock imagin-able, 458 stainless steel parts tight-ly packed in a space the size of a cig-arette pack.

Its parts are all mechanical, rather than electronic, to avoid the risks that an electronic system pos-es in a fire or crash.

In an age where electronics have taken the place of mechanical sys-tems in most of the manufactured devices in our everyday world, Vanecek said, "I believe it's a mechanical engineer's dream to work on strong links."

So Vanecek and his colleagues are starting from scratch, trying to think about how to make a better, more reliable strong link for two of the most important weapons in the U.S. stockpile — the W80 and W76 missile warheads.

When they are done, they hope to have a design that is simpler to manufacture and more reliable than the first generation of strong links designed more than two decades ago.

Said Larson, "We've had 25 years to think about this."

Stockpile stewardship

Since the early 1990s, researchers at the nation's three nuclear weapons labs — Los Alamos, Sandia and Lawrence Livermore — have been working on a project called "Sci-ence-Based Stockpile Stewardship."

The program was launched after the last U.S. underground nuclear test blast, to find ways to maintain U.S. nuclear weapons without actu-ally blowing them up.

They tear apart aging weapons to look for defects, conduct non-nuclear experiments to understand the materials inside the weapons, and use supercomputers to simu-late the complex physics of a weapon's performance.

Stockpile Life Extension takes the product of that research and con-verts it to real-life weapon compo-nents, said Tom Hunter, head of Sandia's nuclear weapons program.

"This is a natural extension, a nat-ural evolution of the Science-Based Stockpile Stewardship program," he said in a recent interview.

Piece by piece, Hunter said, lab scientists are methodically study-ing every single component in the weapons — how each is aging, and if any needs to be rebuilt, how they could be made better.

Sandia has responsibility for the weapon's non-nuclear parts — the electronic circuits and firing and safety systems. Los Alamos weaponeers, meanwhile, are focused on the nuclear parts — the explosives and uranium and pluto-nium parts.

Critics have suggested the scien-tists should just try to build exact replicas of any component that needs to be replaced. But Hunter said in many cases that is not possi-ble because available manufactur-ing technologies change.

Imagine, he said, the problems facing someone trying to build an 8-track tape today.

"We can't build many of the things that we could before," he said.

The idea, Hunter explained, is to make new weapon components that perform exactly the same as the piece they are replacing.

Same old weapons

The program has its critics.

Early efforts were criticized by the U.S. General Accounting Office as being wasteful, a problem pro-gram officials say they believe they have corrected.

Antinuclear activists charge it is a ruse for improving the military capabilities of U.S. nuclear weapons under the guise of refurbishing them and extending their lives.

Where changes are possible to make the warheads more potent, the labs are pursuing them, said Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group, a Santa Fe peace group.

Hunter disagreed.

"These are not new weapons," he said. "The functionality is basically the same."

The goal, Los Alamos' Witt said, is to make the refurbished weapon match as closely as possible the orig-inal tested underground before the test moratorium was put in place.

"We're trying to put the weapon back to an as-tested state," Witt said.

Work is under way at the labs on the W76, carried by submarine-launched missiles, and the W80, car-ried by cruise missiles launched from Air Force bombers.

Extensive modifications also are planned for the B61, a multiuse nuclear bomb that uses antiquated electronic tubes in its firing radar. And schedules have been laid out for refurbishment of other weapons in the U.S. stockpile over the next 20 or more years.

It is a long process.

The first of the refurbished weapons, the B61, will not roll off of the assembly line until 2004, with the first W80s scheduled for 2006 and the first W76 in 2007, according to Goodrum.

For the labs, the Stockpile Life Extension Program has been reju-venating.

Before the end of testing, design-ing new weapons was a big part of the workload. "That was kind of the basis of how we kept the engine run-ning," Hunter said.

With the end of testing in 1992, much of the effort shifted to non-nuclear experiments and weapon surveillance, but the practical work of designing real weapon compo-nents was not there.

The Stockpile Life Extension Pro-gram has replaced some of that focus, with designers working on real components for real stockpile weapons, lab officials say.

"Now they have put that para-digm back," Hunter said.

"What you've got in this is a sense of mission," Witt said.

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Test Anxiety

Bush Flirts With Resuming Nuclear Testing

by Jeffrey St. Clair

In the first few months of the Bush administration, international treaties have been falling faster than old-growth trees. The rebuke of the Kyoto global warming accord grabbed the headlines, but there have been a slate of others: the convention on small arms trade, the chemical and biological weapons treaty, the international ban on whaling, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty. Now the Bush administration wants to end the moratorium on testing nuclear weapons and junk the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Bush fumed against the test ban treaty repeatedly during his campaign, alleging that it undermined national security. Since the election, Bush has remained stubbornly mute on his personal position on resuming nuclear tests. (The current moratorium on nuclear testing was put into place as a pre-election ploy by his father in 1992.) But Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney have been less coy. Both have argued that the United States needs to resume nuclear testing to ensure the reliability of the Pentagon's nuclear weapons cache.

This is an old canard. The only parts of the nuclear stockpile likely to deteriorate are the non-nuclear components, which already are regularly tested and evaluated by the weapons teams without encroaching on the terms of the treaty. "All non-nuclear parts to a weapon can be extensively lab tested and replaced as needed--if needed at all," says Jay Coghlan, director of NukeWatch. "The nuclear parts, specifically plutonium and surrounding high explosives, have been found to actually achieve greater stability with age."

The purported rationale for the U.S. nuclear stockpile, which now totals some 12,000 nukes and 10,000 plutonium pits (or triggers), is deterrence. Coghlan suggests that the real interest of the testing faction isn't to assure reliability, but to shift to more tactical uses. "U.S. nuclear weapons are certainly reliable in the sense that they are sure to go off," he says. "The concern that the military has with reliability is that weapons are not only guaranteed to go off, but explode close to design yield. This is important not for mere deterrence, but for nuclear warfighting."

One of the great myths of the Clinton era was that Clinton supported total abolition of nuclear testing. In fact, Clinton authorized a series of so-called subcritical nuclear tests and a number of other nuclear programs that quietly flouted the test ban treaty--which he simultaneously heckled the Senate for failing to approve. The Bush administration, of course, has no intention of seeking approval for the test ban treaty from the Senate, where it has languished for more than two years. But its top arms control negotiator, John Bolton, undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, has determined that the administration can't unilaterally withdraw the treaty from consideration. The Senate has two options: It can approve the treaty by a two-thirds vote, or it can send it back to the president for renegotiation through a simple resolution, which requires only a majority.

Currently, 161 nations have signed onto the treaty, and 77 nations have ratified it, including the rest of NATO. For the treaty to go into effect, it must be approved by 13 other nations. The other holdouts include China, India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel. But this renegade status doesn't seem to have deterred Bush in the least. Indeed, the president has loaded the top levels of his administration with full-blooded nuclear hawks, including Defense Department flacks Douglas Feith, Richard Armitage and Paul Wolfowitz, all of whom have railed against the limitations of the test ban treaty.

The most fanatical of the brood may well be Jack Crouch, Bush's pick for assistant secretary of defense for international security policy. In the mid-'90s, Crouch, then a professor at Southwest Missouri State, wrote a series of articles attacking the test ban treaty and the testing moratorium. He also argued that the United States should deploy nuclear weapons in South Korea and consider using them against North Korea if they did not accede to U.S. demands to drop their nuclear and biological warfare programs. Crouch reiterated his support for nuclear testing and his opposition to the test ban treaty during his confirmation hearings before the Senate Armed Services Committee. "I think that considering the resumption of testing is something that the administration ought to consider," Crouch said.

Consider it they are. Shortly after taking office, the Bush crowd heard from an advisory committee that had just completed a study on the "reliability, safety and security" of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. The panel was headed by John Foster, former director of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, who now serves as an adviser to TRW, one of the nation's top defense contractors. The Foster group urged the administration to begin taking steps to resume testing as quickly as possible and to begin training a new crop of weapons designers who could develop "robust, alternative warheads that will provide a hedge if problems occur in the future."

Even though most other nuclear scientists disagree, Foster, a protégé of Edward Teller, dismissed computer modeling as a substitute for real nuclear explosions. "There are a number of underground tests we can't reproduce," Foster told a gathering of weapons designers at the National Defense University in June. "We have these enigmas."

For Foster the answer to every enigma seems to be a nuclear explosion. He argues that the U.S. nuclear arsenal is aging and growing ever more unreliable. The average age of nukes in the U.S. weapons stockpile is 18 years, which Foster claims is six years older than their intended design life. "They will be many times their design life before they are replaced," Foster said. "We have opened some of the warheads and found some defects that are worrisome."

Using the Foster report as an excuse, in June the Bush administration instructed the Department of Energy to study how to shorten the time it takes to prepare nuclear tests at the Nevada Test Site, the 1,350-square-mile bombing range 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas. Currently, the DOE says it will take at least 36 months to resume testing. But hard-liners in the Bush administration, such as Gen. John A. Gordon--director of the National Nuclear Security Administration, a shadowy wing of the DOE that manages nuclear weapons research, development and testing--want this time reduced to less than four months. "We are conducting an internal review on how we can improve significantly our readiness posture to conduct a nuclear test, should we ever be so directed," Gordon testified before the House. "This is not a proposal to conduct a test, but I am not comfortable with not being able to conduct a test within three years."

The move to truncate the readiness period for tests exposes yet another double-standard in the Bush administration's foreign policy. As the Pentagon moves ever closer toward resumption of testing, Secretary of State Colin Powell continues to chide India and Pakistan about dire consequences if either nation conducts new nuclear tests. "The Nuclear Security Agency's site readiness effort will unfortunately send exactly the wrong message to other would-be testers and test ban treaty hold-out states, including India, Pakistan and China," says Daryl Kimball of the Coalition to Reduce Nuclear Dangers. "It leaves the door open to a global chain reaction of nuclear testing, instability and confrontation in the future."

However, the rising anxiety over the Bush administration's frank talk about resuming live testing of nuclear weapons may serve to distract attention from a more ominous venture: the development of a new class of nuclear weapons systems. Most of the action these days is in the innocuous sounding Stockpile Stewardship Program. The stated intent of the program was to maintain an "enduring" arsenal of nuclear weapons and components. But that mission has discreetly changed. Now the Pentagon and the DOE talk about the "evolving" nature of the stockpile. Evolving is a code word for improving. The nuclear labs are busy turning old nukes into new ones.

During testimony before the House, Gordon groused that for the past decade the Pentagon had not been able to actively pursue new weapons designs. He said he wanted to "reinvigorate" planning for a new generation of "advanced nuclear warheads." "This is not a proposal to develop new weapons in the absence of requirements," Gordon told the committee in a gem of Pentagon doublespeak. "But I am now not exercising design capabilities, and because of that, I believe this capacity and capability is atrophying rapidly."

Gordon wasn't being entirely truthful. The Pentagon and its weapons designers have been busy quietly crafting a variety of new weapons over the past decade. In 1997, they unveiled and deployed the B61-11, described as a mere modification of the old B61-7 gravity bomb. In reality, it was the prototype for the "low-yield" bunker blasting nuke that the weaponeers see as the future of the U.S. arsenal.

The testing issue may be a kind of political bait-and-switch designed to garner more money for the Stockpile Stewardship Program. The gambit goes likes this: If you won't let us test the weapons, you've got to appropriate more money. Lots more. "The nuclear testing issue is a kind of red herring," says Greg Mello, director of the Los Alamos Study Group. "All discussion of possible 'nuclear testing' as the problem distracts attention from the real work of the complex, which does not need nuclear testing for 80 to 90 percent of its work. It is a form of blackmail."

Instead of pursuing disarmament, the big prize for the weapons labs has been the lavishly funded Stockpile Life Extension Program, an array of projects designed to stretch out the operational life of existing weapons for at least another 30 years. Currently, four major nuclear weapons are undergoing major upgrading under SLEP: the B61, known as a "dial-a-yield" bomb with a yield of 10 to 500 megatons; W76, the warhead for the Minuteman III ICBM with an explosive power of 170 kilotons; the W80, a warhead for cruise missiles; and the W87, a warhead for the Peacekeeper ICBM. The Pentagon wants another 11 systems modified.

These developments subvert the Pentagon's own official policy, signed by President Clinton in 1994, calling for "no new nuclear weapons production." The weaponeers at the Pentagon and the DOE are very touchy about the way they talk about these new bombs, being careful to speak in euphemisms like "reliability" and "safety" and "stewardship" of the "stockpile." "Energy Department managers have been sensitive to the hypocrisy in this program," Mello says. "The DOE honchos have even suggested that, given the political environment, the use of the word 'warhead' may not be acceptable."

There's a reason that the Pentagon and the labs have fixated on the idea of producing a new line of low-yield nukes: They can be redesigned and deployed without a new round of underground tests. And that may be a big part of the bait-and-switch approach, with the Pentagon arguing that since they were prohibited from testing new weapons, they were forced to retool old ones into the new mini-nukes favored by the Bushies--nukes that are geared not for deterrence, but for use against recalcitrant regimes.

But just because there's a push to build mini-nukes doesn't mean that the hawks have forgotten the big ones. According to the Bush squad, Russia still remains a threat and a justification for maintaining a robust strategic arsenal of bombs capable of leveling large cities. In this spirit, the Navy is teaming up with the Los Alamos and Sandia labs on a project called the Submarine Warhead Protection Plan. The labs and the Pentagon are desperate to protect their bomb-making mission, and they've done a good job of keeping

the new schemes funded, including upgrades of several of the nuclear packages for Trident submarines. Los Alamos is also working on the development of new systems that will allow older "air-burst" weapons to be converted into bombs that explode close to the ground, thus becoming what Rear Adm. George P. Nanos delicately refers to as "hard-target killers."

Beyond these pursuits, a host of other weapons design programs are up and running coast-to-coast, including: the insanely expensive National Ignition Facility at Lawrence Livermore; plutonium pit factories; pulsed power plants; dynamic radiography facilities; tritium production plants; magnetized-target fusion research; an advanced facility designed to generate 3-D movies of imploding nuclear pits. These are the multibillion-dollar research toys of the modern weapons designer.

In the end, the nuclear game always comes down to one overriding obsession: money. For the past 50 years, the nuclear programs of the Pentagon and allied agencies have been among the most extravagantly funded and sacrosanct items in the federal budget. During the height of the Cold War, annual federal spending on nuclear weapons programs averaged about $4 billion in today's money. The fiscal year 2002 budget proposed by Bush earmarks $5.3 billion for DOE nuclear programs, a figure that will almost certainly be generously boosted by Congress. Indeed, New Mexico Sen. Pete Dominici, the Republican guardian of the Los Alamos and Sandia labs, vowed in July to hold the entire federal appropriations bill hostage unless spending on military programs, including nuclear weapons research, was substantially hiked.

In the political economy of nuclear weapons, enough is never enough. Endless expansion is the relentless logic of a monopoly protected by secrecy. "The nuclear weaponeers want it all," says Marylia Kelley, director of Tri-County Cares, a Livermore watchdog group. "This remains true regardless of who is president."

###

Group Says Labs Eying New Nukes

Official: Work Theoretical

By Jennifer McKee 2/15/02
Journal Staff Writer

Scientists at the nation's nuclear weapons labs, including the two in New Mexico, are being formed into teams to conceive new nuclear weapons designs, according to a report by a national environmental group that says it obtained parts of a secret government nuclear weapons policy report.

The Natural Resources Defense Council, headquartered in New York City, released the report Thursday which says scientists at Los Alamos and Sandia national labs have been called upon to consider new nuclear weapons designs.

The report is based on information the council says it gleaned from the secret Nuclear Posture Review, a road map of the nation's nuclear policy the Bush administration completed earlier this year but has not fully released to the public.

BINGAMAN

"I was told we are not. We are not designing or developing new warheads."

SEN. JEFF BINGAMAN, D-N.M.

The head of the National Nuclear Security Administration, a branch of the federal Energy Department which runs the weapons labs, testified about the Nuclear Posture Review at a Senate hearing Thursday in Washington.

John Gordon, administrator of the NNSA, said his agency has formed "small groups" of designers to "explore what might be possible" with new nuclear weapons designs.

"We do this with an appreciation on the restrictions on pursuing new weapons," said Gordon. He added that the work is not looking at any specific military needs and is more theoretical.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., serves on the Senate Armed Services Committee and was at Thursday's hearing. Bingaman said he asked Gordon specifically whether the nation was engaged in designing new nuclear warheads.

"I was told we are not," Bingaman said. "We are not designing or developing new warheads."

The Natural Resources Defense Council report said the NNSA "is re-establishing advanced warhead concept design teams at each of the three design laboratories — Los Alamos, Sandia and Lawrence Livermore."

The teams will focus on designing new nuclear weapons to penetrate "hardened and deeply buried targets," and for attacking chemical or biological warfare sites. The teams will also

See **GROUP** *on* **PAGE 2**

Group: Labs Designing New Nukes

from **PAGE 1**

focus on new nuclear weapons designed to be more precise and with "reduced yields," or lesser powerful nuclear weapons than the hydrogen bombs currently in the U.S. nuclear stockpile.

The nation has not formally pursued new nuclear weapons since the early 1990s, when President George Bush Sr. issued a presidential directive against it, according to Chris Paine of the Defense Council.

The design teams are part of a larger U.S. nuclear policy that re-examines the existing nuclear arsenal developed during the Cold War and identifies different potential targets for nuclear weapons. Those new targets could demand new kinds of nuclear weapons, according to the report. But because designing and building new weapons is a long and complicated process, the Bush administration wants to start early with design, the report said.

According to excerpts from Gordon's testimony Thursday, Gordon said he also sees three main areas of change in the nation's existing nuclear capabilities and infrastructure.

Along with the design teams, Gordon said the nation must be able to perform an actual nuclear test, something that has not been done in 10 years. Gordon said he doesn't think the nation actually needs to perform a nuclear test but should be able to if the need ever arises.

He also said the nation needs to "think seriously about a modern pit production facility." Pits are the plutonium-sphered engines of every nuclear weapon. The nation has not manufactured a new pit in more than a decade.

Bingaman said he has read neither the National Resources Defense Council report nor the Nuclear Posture Review. "I think our national policy of not developing nuclear weapons has served us well," he said.

Gordon stressed in his comments that the design team that NNSA has assembled is formed to "help ensure long-term design competence," and is not a pursuit of a specific new nuclear weapon or warhead. He further said that his agency is "focused almost exclusively on maintaining today's stockpile."

Still, the report and Gordon's testimony, alarmed some activists.

"We're very familiar with this agenda," said Paine. "We thought we left it behind 17 years ago."

Paine said the information his group obtained doesn't paint a complete picture and leaves room for questions.

Greg Mello, of the Los Alamos Study Group in Santa Fe, said including new weapons designs in the Nuclear Posture Review "provides legitimacy" to the effort and may confound U.S. efforts to contain the spread of nuclear weapons elsewhere in the world.

"It will be very difficult to go into an international gathering and say we are ending the arms race when we are planning on making new weapons," he said.

THE ALBUQUERQUE TRIBUNE 4-9-02

INSIGHT & OPINION

Analysis, commentary and ideas

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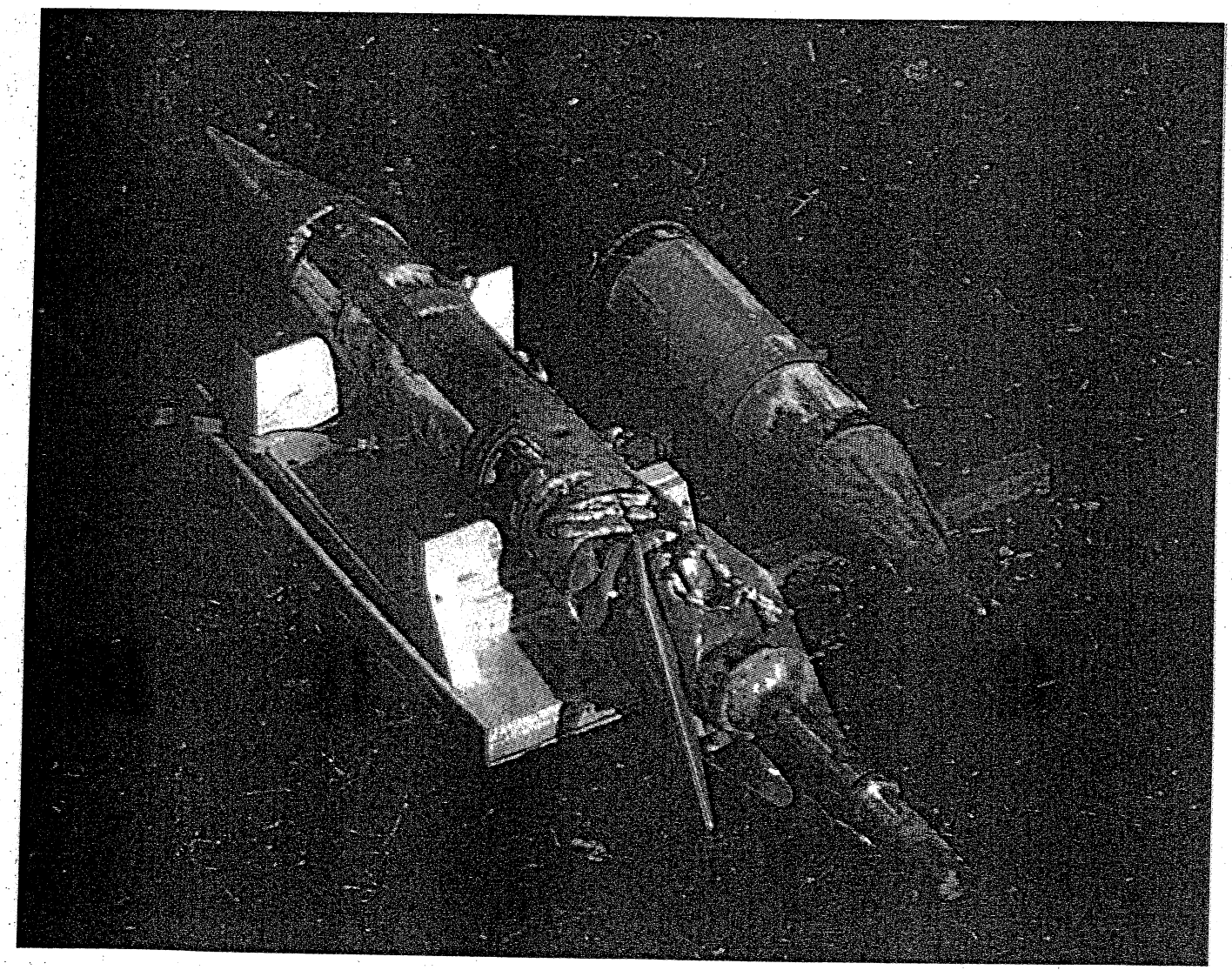
BACK TO THE NUCLEAR FUTURE



Mark Farmer/Associated Press

President Bush's recently completed "Nuclear Posture Review" strategy seeks the capability for new, earth-penetrating, bunker-busting warheads, capable of far deeper penetrations than these two test U.S. B61-11 penetrating warheads. Loaded with depleted uranium, they were readied for return to Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque for analysis after a March 1998 test at the Fort Wainright bombing range near Fairbanks, Alaska. They were dropped from a B-2A Stealth bomber and penetrated the permafrost to depths of 6 to 10 feet.

The more things change in the post-Cold War world, today's author warns, the more the nation's nuclear arsenal and two of its creators, New Mexico's nuclear weapons laboratories, stay the same – bucking the global trend toward denuclearization

By Greg Mello

On Dec. 31, the Bush administration delivered to Congress its nuclear weapons strategy, "Nuclear Posture Review."

On Jan. 9, the press was briefed.

In keeping with nuclear tradition, few details were provided; the briefing was confined to broad ideas and opaque terminology.

Fortunately, by mid-February, the first details of the actual plan began to leak, first to the Natural Resources Defense Council and later to major newspapers.

The devil, as it turned out, is in the details for U.S. nuclear policy and for nuclear weapons facilities such as New Mexico's Sandia and Los Alamos national laboratories.

What an active fellow that devil turns out to be!

The Bush nuclear strategy was pitched — and largely reported — as "new thinking" that would allow the United States to reduce its nuclear stockpile from about 10,650 warheads and bombs today to between 1,700 and 2,200 in 10 years.

But the Bush plan doesn't actually involve real stockpile reductions. Despite the headlines, total U.S. warheads are to be reduced by 6 percent over 10 years, or fewer than 1 percent per year.

This is because only one warhead type would be actually dismantled — the decades-old W62 warhead currently mounted on Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles. Previously slated for elimination, they were temporarily reprieved when congressional Republicans scuttled ratification of the START II treaty.

Other than the W62, all the "reductions" in the plan are like Enron debts, simply moved to subsidiaries with different names.

Warheads taken from the category of "operational deployment" will be either redesignated the "responsive force," or placed in the "strategic inactive stockpile." There they will mostly remain intact and available for active redeployment at any time, in some cases within weeks, depending on the weapon in question. All these weapons could be redeployed when desired, which is the precise reason they are being kept.

The Enron-style accounting, however, doesn't stop there.

Aside from assembled nuclear weapons, the United States also has in reserve thousands of components, including plutonium "pits," the nuclear cores of weapons. Some 5,000 "strategic reserve" pits, and possibly thousands more, are now stored near Amarillo, Texas, where they are available for ready remanufacture into a number of pretested weapon designs.

The number of nuclear warheads and bombs potentially available under the Bush plan is closer to 15,000 than the "1,700 to 2,200" figure that was pitched to gullible journalists.

The gravest dangers of the Bush nuclear strategy, however, do not lie just in its numerical sleight-of-hand. Rather, they lie in its pursuit of new nuclear capabilities — both weapons and the infrastructure to quickly make them — and in a newly serious, bloody-minded policy that would justify their use in battles around the world.

The Bush team calls its strategy the "New Triad." It integrates nuclear strike forces with missile defenses — both with conventional power projection forces — and supports these with a "revitalized (nuclear) infrastructure that will provide new capabilities in a timely fashion to meet emerging threats."

Put simply, this nuclear strategy aims to integrate nuclear weapons more tightly into the military with a variety of new roles, including and especially nuclear war-fighting. The plan gives specific examples of situations in which nuclear weapons might be used, and sets a new, very low, threshold for considering a nuclear strike.

The plan calls for the development of new kinds of nuclear weapons, such as better earth-penetrating weapons and "agent defeat" weapons designed to incinerate biological and chemical warfare agents. Advanced concept teams to design these and other weapons are to be started at the nuclear weapons laboratories such as Los Alamos and Sandia.

Because some of these new designs will require nuclear testing, "Posture Review" requires the Nevada test site be readied to conduct new nuclear tests (which would violate the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty) with only a few months' lead time, certainly faster than Congress' response time.

It will not be inconvenient, for those who wish to resume nuclear testing, if other countries, for example China, are provoked to follow our lead. Projecting a need for nuclear weapons and their delivery systems at least 50 years hence, this plan calls for new, expanded and upgraded nuclear weapon production plants to make and maintain nuclear weapons, as one senior Department of Energy official put it, "forever."

All of this in the face of sweeping global efforts to denuclearize the world through nonproliferation, test bans and disarmament treaties.

In the Clinton administration, a cloud of deception lay over the varied purposes of what the DOE calls its "stockpile stewardship" program that allegedly was supposed to only monitor and maintain the existing arsenal.

Most Democrats, eager to placate the labs, couldn't — or wouldn't — see that the expanded capabilities that make that program so expensive were *not* actually needed to maintain existing U.S. nuclear weapons.

In fact, many of those capabilities, quite possibly including nuclear testing, *are* needed to make existing nuclear weapons different or to develop new ones. It is this strategy the Bush team has brought out of the closet for the world to see.

The plan's premise is that to achieve the specificity and speed required for credible nuclear tactical warfare in a Third World setting, an array of ambitious new military capabilities with global reach is needed. Not only must new weapons be tailored and certified for new kinds of targets; better — much better — targeting intelligence will also be required on the ground and in the skies; and very rapid strike planning capability will also be needed to support an evolving nuclear battlefield.

Please see **FUTURE/C3**

TODAY'S BYLINE

Mello is director of the Los Alamos Study Group, a Santa Fe-based nuclear watchdog group that concentrates on Los Alamos National Laboratory.

TAP IN

Leaked portions of the Bush nuclear plan can be seen at: **http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm**

To comment, **write to us at** Letters to the editor, The Albuquerque Tribune, P.O. Drawer T, Albuquerque, N.M. 87103. **Our fax number is** 823-3689. **Our e-mail address is** letters@abqtrib.com.

INSIDE: **Editorial:** On the Sandia Labs contract, **Page C2.** **Columns:** Marjorie Bell Chambers on the Middle East, **Page C2;** On

FUTURE *from C1*

But with this level of detailed, on-the-ground intelligence (and hence "presence"), what would be the military "value added" of a nuclear strike — even if you do not consider the catastrophic consequences for global nuclear nonproliferation, U.S. stature at home and abroad, or homeland security?

There are many such hard military questions, all unanswered in this plan.

In fact, the plan appears to reflect more the budgetary needs of the nuclear weapons complex and the political needs of civilian ideologues than any coherent military strategy per se.

Indeed, the plan reads, in many places, as if the senior military officers — who blessed it — have been sold a bill of goods by enthusiastic weapons scientists and colonels who seek to maintain or expand nuclear capabilities, or by political actors who seek a posture of nuclear threat as essential to buttressing their aspirations of empire.

Does the military, and do members of Congress, know that so-called "low-yield" nuclear weapons cannot penetrate the earth more than a certain, relatively small amount, for fundamental physical reasons? Because they depend on physical law, they cannot transcend research, however lucrative the goal?

Do they know that the capability to destroy an enemy underground leadership bunker with a small nuclear weapon, let alone an underground storehouse of biological or chemical weapons, is actually rather limited — whereas the damage to any surrounding population from even a very small nuclear weapon would be extensive, unpredictable, long-lasting and devastating?

This is a security plan that needs a serious reality check, one that Democratic leaders of Congress such as New Mexico's Sen. Jeff Bingaman could and must provide.

In the late 1940s, our political and military leaders thought their monopoly on nuclear weapons gave them the "winning weapon," in historian Gregg Herken's memorable phrase. This ambition was frustrated by the Soviet Union's success at building its own nuclear weapons and, at terrible cost to its people, catching up — and keeping up — with the United States.

The superpower contest threatened the whole world but might have helped prevent nuclear use by both nations.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union were a "near-death experience" for many nuclear weapons managers, ideologues and war planners. The devilish details of the Bush strategy, however, offer them salvation, with all the passion of a second chance.

Now lacking another superpower to help restrain them, this time we had all better get prepared to do it ourselves.

Eldorado Sun May 2002

A Terrifying Tour of the Lab in Los Alamos

by Shannyn Sollitt

On December 15, 2001, Greg Mello and associates of the Los Alamos Study Group took citizens on a tour of Los Alamos National Laboratory. Most know that the Lab, a part of the University of California, is the site for the manufacturing of plutonium pits, the trigger for nuclear weapons. Although 20,000 perfectly good back up nuclear weapons are stored in a bunker in Amarillo, our government feels the need to constantly renew the stockpile of weapons, mainly to be able to recruit scientists. They need some way to test scientific skills — real design, real prototyping, real manufacturing and testing.

$700 million has been spent so far on developing the pit manufacturing facility which currently employs about 1000 people. There will be a lot of nuclear waste as a result — enough, they anticipate, to fill up an entire mesa, Mesita del Buey. Already 11 million cubic feet of chemical and nuclear waste are buried there, along with nuclear reactor cores, in shallow unlined pits and shafts. On top, mildly fire resistant tents house 50,000 drums of transuranic radioactive waste intended for WIPP over the next 30 years. This waste dump has been operating illegally since 1985, with no external oversight. The illegal dump will continue to grow under the Stockpile Stewardship Program — around 9000 cubic meters per year. The trees there have elevated levels of radio-nuclides. Burrowing animals are radioactive. It is ranked as a low priority site for clean up, primarily because there is not enough citizen outrage.

VULNERABLE TO ATTACK

First on the tour, Tech Area 18 is where they test burst reactors for criticality experiments and test the effects of radiation on electronic equipment. About $3 million dollars worth of research is done there. This area is so vulnerable to attack that it costs $32 million to protect it against theft or the radiological sabotage of special nuclear materials, i.e. weapons grade plutonium and enriched uranium. Around 200 tons of these special materials are spread across LANL. All facilities across the entire complex that house special nuclear materials have been tested against a potential terrorist attack (a kind of laser gun tag). Fifty percent of the time, the bad guys win.

Tech Area 55, the Plutonium Processing Plant, is decorated with an orange windsock so that, when the alarm sounds, people know which way to run. The fire of 2000 came to within 100 feet of a light steel building, #185, which contained at that time around 20 kilograms of concentrated plutonium waste — considered a Category One Nuclear Waste Facility. The Department of Energy didn't know it was there. When plutonium burns, it disperses in the smoke and can travel for many miles, depending on the wind, making an eternal wasteland of its path. There are huge safety problems with storage of plutonium, a very unstable material, extremely difficult to store. There are 3 metric tons of weapons grade plutonium stored at TA 55. $19 million was spent on a storage facility there that had such egregious faults, it was turned into an office building. Terrible accidents have happened inside the facility, dosing numbers of workers with plutonium.

QUESTIONS ABOUT BIO-DEFENSE WORK

Next stop, the site of the CMR (Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Building) is the largest building at the Lab, sitting atop a modern earthquake fault. Two Bio-Safety Level 3 labs, (BSL3), will be built on the adjacent parking lot. Level 3 labs handle pathogens contracted through inhalation — classical bio-weapons agents. Proposals to construct these two labs are at the vanguard of a huge bio-defense research funding, anticipated nationally to be in the tens of billions of dollars. It is not clear what research will be done in these two proposed facilities, and there is no way to tell if this type of research is offensive or defensive — until it is in a warhead. Particularly worrisome is the tinkering with the genetic engineering of pathogens.

Edward Hammond (the Sunshine Project) enlightened the citizens about the six years of negotiation at the UN Biological Weapons Convention. The US completely shut down the United Nations Organization for the Prohibition of Biological Warfare and nixed the Verification Agreement which would allow UN oversight and regular inspections. The US refusal to participate rendered the Verification Agreement null and void. The Labs were the main opponents of the Agreement. DOE facilities are not transparent.

When the US backed out of the Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty, the international community became even more suspicious of the US. For the past years it has become apparent to them that the US has been blatantly lying about its bio-defense work. Every other country would open their facilities. It is known that bio-bombs have

been tested "out west" in a secret aerosol facility. In Sverdlovsk, Russia, less than 2 grams of anthrax escaped through the filters at an aerosol testing facility and killed 1000 people. A small mistake can be very serious to adjacent populations, not to mention what bio-warfare might look like. A Bill awaiting consideration in the Senate, H.R. 3160, eliminates from the Freedom of Information Act the right for research organizations, citizen's groups, and others, to know what is happening in these facilities.

BUT WHO CAN MAKE IT WORK?

Just around the corner, the "Cathedral of Computing," the world's largest computer, will be able to compute 1000 trillion numerical operations per second. It has six cooling towers and consumes, at peak capacity, power which equals 1/3 the power of Los Alamos County — including the entire Lab. Primarily, its purpose is to simulate nuclear explosions. The weapons designers, however, doubt that the calculations of the computer programmers could be even remotely reliable. Among the other work they expect to use it for is bio organism modification, synthesis of new life forms, as well as other jobs like keeping track of all the bank accounts in the world. Based on the past track record with other super computers at LANL, when the final installation is complete, it is likely that no one will be able to figure out how to make the thing work — with a $200 million price tag.

Last, but far from least, on top of a mesa amid ancient pueblo dwellings is Tech Area 53. Los Alamos Neutron Science Center is where the high current proton accelerator can be used to make isotopes. It is poised for the largest project proposal in the history of the Lab: the development of the Advanced Hydrotest Facility, (AHF), with an initial capital cost of $1.6 billion. This is the weapon designer's dream. They expect to be able to simulate the closest approximation of a real nuclear explosion, save actual testing of the weapon. It will send a beam of protons across the mesas from an underground explosion chamber 350 feet below the top of the mesa. It has a high-speed x-ray machine for plutonium pit implosion photography. The program is so large it could consume 3/4 of the existing plutonium processing capabilities of the Lab. They can't manufacture a pit if it can't be tested. This is a very high priority project. This huge program can go forward, Greg Mello believes, because the citizens aren't informed by the press. The Energy and Water Appropriations Committee, headed up by New Mexico Senator Domenici, appropriates the funding. There is no Congressional oversight. According to Washington insiders, the appropriation committee members are dazzled by technology without a real idea what the bomb complex is about.

A DOZEN PEOPLE DECIDE

Seventy-nine percent of the Laboratory activity is nuclear weapons and associated waste. Only a dozen people make the decisions as to the directives of the Lab. It is difficult to begin to know what to do about this situation which has been progressively worsening for decades. Are the appropriations really in the name of National Security or something altogether different? Greg Mello queries whether it is in our best security interests to create more reasons for the international community to fear the actions of the United States. Wouldn't it be better to remove the desire of others to inflict casualties on US citizens by working to correct the massive social injustice at the root of this desire — stemming from the imbalance of the utilization of world resources? Can the small group of thoughtful, committed citizens *really* change the world, (as Margaret Mead has said), or does the group need to be a whole lot bigger?

CALL TO ACTION

If this article disturbs you, contact the Los Alamos Study Group at 982-7747 for more information about how you can help.

O

An Eerie Voice From the Past

In the film archives of the Library of Congress there exists what might be the only remaining copy of a film entitled *When Will You Hide?*, released by Encyclopedia Britannica Films in 1948. The script is like a voice from behind the curtain, eerily delivering the unfolding scenario of the Nuclear Age.

It opens:

"The long Shadow of World War III, the first war of the atomic age, creeps steadily forward... Civilization stands in mortal danger! The cool methodical searching by scientists has given us an ever-growing control of the physical world, has provided each of us with a thousand mechanical slaves. Yet through all the years of opportunity we have not learned how to get along with our neighbors, man with man, or nation with nation... [and still] seek justice through slaughter and expect good to emerge from the reeking evil of war."

The film accurately lays out the advancements of weapons technologies which have since been developed — the self guiding rockets, the bacteria and germ warfare, the biological poisons which could kill every human on the North American Continent, the atomic bombs one thousand times more destructive than the ones used against Japan. It even predicts the effort to stop saboteurs.

"We could search all planes and trains and boats and automobiles crossing our borders. We could open every single package... We could remain on a constant, twenty-four hour, day-in day-out alert under some kind of dictatorship."

"We could devote all of our scientific effort to the constant improvement of weapons at the sacrifice of most constructive scientific programs. We could restrict ourselves to a standard of living under which everything but the barest essentials of existence would be sacrificed to a futile defense against the inevitable. Such a defense means a totalitarian America! A regimented population! A militarized industry!" — *S.S.*

6-16-02

Plutonium pits and LANL's Nuclear future

The lab expects to certify its first trigger for the W-88 warhead in 2007 at a cost of $1.7 billion. But in an era of nonproliferation, critics question the need for a Cold War-era manufacturing capacity.

Story by Jeff Tollefson ♦ The New Mexican

Inside Technical Area 55 at Los Alamos National Laboratory, workers machine heavy, hollow orbs of plutonium that trigger thermonuclear bombs. Glove boxes and other equipment allow them to handle this man-made metal safely.

One day, one of these triggers, called pits, is likely to be certified for use in a W-88 warhead carried by the Trident submarine. A 475-kiloton bomb, the Los Alamos-designed warhead is 30 times more powerful than the one dropped on Hiroshima.

This activity is not entirely new. Pit manufacturing began at Los Alamos in the early nuclear years, and the lab has always built a small number of test pits. But in 1996, seven years after the closure of the old pit-manufacturing site at Rocky Flats in Colorado, the U.S. Department of Energy designated Los Alamos as a temporary site to build the W-88 pit.

"The next pit we do will not be $1.7 billion."

DON McCOY
deputy associate director for weapons physics at Los Alamos

The lab reports it has completed about a dozen test pits since the effort began in 1996. The first certified pit — ready for installation in a nuclear warhead — is scheduled for release in 2007, although the DOE inspector general has questioned whether the lab would be able to meet that goal. Los Alamos has 700 to 800 people working directly or indirectly on the pro-

Please see **PITS,** Page A-6

Inside

■ President Bush's Nuclear Posture Review considers nuclear weapons to attack underground enemies, an idea that raises questions in political as well as scientific arenas.

■ Los Alamos National Laboratory aims to consolidate nuclear facilities at Technical Area 55.

Stories on Page A-6

Plutonium pits and LANL's future

Pits: Critics question need for more production

Continued from Page A-1

ject. Total cost from 2001 to 2007: $1.7 billion.

"The next pit we do will not be $1.7 billion," said Don McCoy, deputy associate director for weapons physics at Los Alamos. Although working on a single pit at present, McCoy said the lab is developing a process that can be used to build and certify pits for different nuclear weapons without nuclear testing. Once the W-88 project is up and running, he explained, Los Alamos could move on to other pits.

Local nuclear activists feared such an outcome more than a decade ago. With pit manufacturing come safety issues and the inevitable increase in nuclear waste. Rocky Flats carries a notorious environmental legacy, but most agree the process is much cleaner today.

"Making pits has never been safe, and it won't be safe. It can be made safer, and I'm sure Los Alamos is working on that, but it's not a nice process," said Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group. "But the deeper problems have to do with a commitment which could have a lot of unintended consequences for nonproliferation and U.S. security."

From Mello's perspective, Los Alamos, as a nuclear-weapons research facility, has a vested interest in new designs. If these were approved, it would increase the possibility that the DOE might one day say it cannot prove beyond a doubt — without a nuclear test — that a given weapon is reliable.

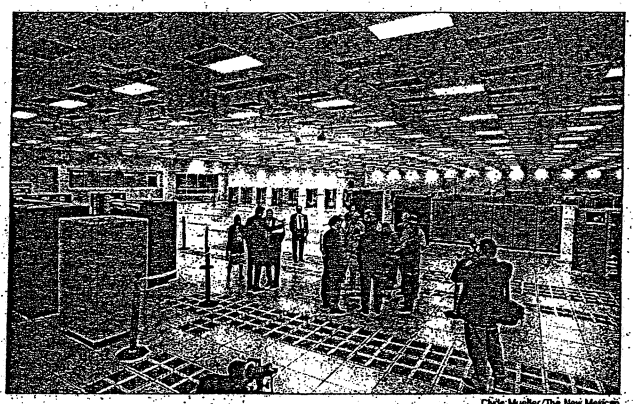
The Bush administration talks about both new designs and the potential return to testing in its nuclear-posture review. The administration announced May 30 it will pursue plans for a full-scale pit-manufacturing facility that would begin operating in 2020, sparking further criticism from the disarmament crowd.

Until then, however, pit production belongs to Los Alamos. In the case of the W-88, Los Alamos officials say that job came about because Rocky Flats simply didn't make enough spare pits for the bomb before closing; a certain number of pits are cut open and destroyed to check for flaws during routine maintenance. But the mission runs much deeper than that.

Anatomy of a pit

So how, exactly, does a pit — or thermonuclear bomb trigger — work?

Conventional explosives compress the plutonium pit, a hollow orb often compared to a grapefruit in size, until it reaches a critical density. Energy from the fission reaction in the plutonium, boosted by fusion in a deuterium-tritium mixture, triggers the secondary hydrogen bomb, which provides the bulk of the device's military might.



Clyde Mueller/The New Mexican

Journalists tour the computer room in the Nicholas C. Metropolis Center for Modeling and Simulation at Los Alamos National Laboratory as the first phase of the Q computer is installed. Q will run weapons codes as part of the lab's effort to certify pits and nuclear weapons.

Of course, this is a gross oversimplification. It also occurs unimaginably fast. And just as a tiny amount of material holds an enormous amount of nuclear energy, small changes in shape, design, materials and timing can have large consequences on bomb performance.

Weapon designers say it used to be easy to measure these effects: Blow up a test bomb. Most recently, this took place underground at the Nevada Test Site. The United States halted such activities in 1992, however, after its 1,054th nuclear test.

Los Alamos now uses other methods, including standard tests on explosives; computer modeling — the lab has a new computer facility; radiography, or imaging of simulated explosions conducted at the as-yet-incomplete Dual-Axis Radiographic Hydrodynamic Test Facility; and a host of other analyses. It's pretty much the full suite of science behind the current weapons-research program, since certifying a new pit is akin to certifying a new weapon.

Skeptics note that Rocky Flats didn't shut down all that long ago, while LANL has been manufacturing five to 10 test pits annually for years. Why is it so difficult now? LANL's McCoy said the lab started out in a similar mind-set in 1995: "But what happened was people came in and said, 'Well, prove to me that it will work, without a test.' And we've never been asked that question before."

McCoy said the lab has hired a lot of people from Rocky Flats — some say it picked up their expertise to assure the lab would get the pit-manufacturing job. Even so, LANL cannot exactly replicate many of the processes used at Rocky Flats. McCoy notes that in many cases chemicals and lubricants once commonplace at Rocky Flats are not allowed under current environmental rules.

Either way, from McCoy's perspective, the entire plutonium culture has changed. Designers never really had to understand plutonium before. They knew it would blow up, and that was good enough. All the weapons were replaced every 10 to 15 years anyway, he said. "We didn't have a reason to build a lot of experimental data on materials and properties."

Understanding plutonium

Now, laboratories want to understand exactly what plutonium is and how it behaves, he said, since predicting with confidence exactly how a bomb will behave is much more difficult than measuring the results of a test.

Ultimately, the questions Los Alamos is asking about its new pits must also be answered for the old ones. Much as the fenders on an old truck gradually give way to rust, radioactive decay gradually changes the make-up of plutonium in pits. It isn't clear, however, exactly what happens as pits age. To date, no pits have been pulled from the stockpile due to aging problems, according to McCoy, but how can the labs be sure about the future?

The Energy Department has set out on what is by any account an increasingly expensive project, dubbed Stockpile Stewardship, in search of proof the nuclear arsenal is up to snuff. The oldest weapons date back perhaps 25 years, since the stockpile used to be entirely replaced every decade or two, according to the lab. Critics point out that the DOE is spending much more on nuclear weapons now than it did during the Cold War, but McCoy said the program was not designed to save money. The alternative to testing, he said, is much more difficult.

"The country made a policy to stop testing, based on nonproliferation. ... The goal wasn't to be cheaper," he said. "It was to make sure that weapons didn't spread to other countries and to send a message."

It used to be that computer codes only had to be good enough to indicate when a design was ready for testing. "Now," he said, "we're still in a situation where we know our codes are wrong, but we're being asked if everything is OK."

Nonetheless, just as the lab cites proof as the overriding concern in certifying a pit, critics say the DOE has no proof it needs any new pits, let alone the full-scale production facility proposed last week by the National Nuclear Security Administration, which is charged with Stockpile Stewardship. NNSA officials say the facility could be capable of producing around 250 pits annually, although watchdogs cite the administration's overarching Nuclear Posture Review in saying the facility design might allow for 500 to 600 pits annually.

NNSA officials say such questions are premature since the proposal is only in the initial planning stages. Estimated at $2 billion to $4 billion, the plant would open in 2020, according to the agency.

Coupled with what many see as an overall effort by the Bush administration to boost the nation's nuclear capabilities, this project has raised the ire of critics who say the United States is planning an expensive and unnecessary return to the Cold War era. Why create a massive manufacturing capacity when, according to the treaty recently signed by Presidents Bush and Vladimir Putin of Russia, both nations' active arsenals would be reduced to 1,700 to 2,200 active nuclear weapons by 2012?

"When the country has almost 15,000 plutonium pits, why we would need a facility to manufacture new ones is quite extraordinary. How much security do you need?" asked Chris Paine, senior analyst at the national nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council. "After all, one Trident submarine can kill 60 million Russians, as a sample calculation. There just is no justification for a capacity that large other than some oddball nuclear planner's version of what nuclear superiority is."

Paine said the United States would lose all credibility for its nonproliferation policies if it moves forward with such a facility. Like many, he often notes the Cold War is over: "Russians are our friends." Furthermore, Paine is one of many who argue there is no evidence to suggest that pits go bad with age.

"No one has been able to say what the life-limiting factors of the pit are, and they haven't been able to observe any," he said.

"But the deeper problems have to do with a commitment which could have a lot of unintended consequences for nonproliferation and U.S. security."

GREG MELLO
Los Alamos Study Group

Improving with age?

In a 2-year-old paper published in *Physics Today*, University of California-Berkeley Professor Raymond Jeanloz cited various studies, including work by Los Alamos researchers, indicating the interior crystal structure of plutonium might actually "get closer to the ideal crystal structure with increasing age." He cited consensus among specialists that plutonium pits "are stable over periods of at least 50 to 60 years, with the most recent studies suggesting a far longer period."

He underscored these conclusions in a recent interview.

"There have been some remarkable discoveries ... and they all tend to reinforce the idea that this very complicated material ages relatively benignly," said Jeanloz, who is a member of JASON, a group of scientists who offer technical advice to federal policy-makers on national defense.

Nonetheless, Jeanloz is hesitant to come down on either side of the pit-production debate. The issue, he said, is not so much whether we need one now, but whether we should begin preparing for a future date when we might: It could take a long time to go from design to production. At the same time, he recognizes that building a major pit-production facility sends a message to the international community.

For these reasons, Jeanloz advocates for the United States to take the time to gather all the technical expertise before making a final decision.

NNSA spokeswoman Lisa Cutler said the ongoing uncertainty about how plutonium ages is real, but that is only one part of the puzzle.

"The department has determined that we need to have the capacity to manufacture all of the pits in the current stockpile and to be able to respond to any future requirements," Cutler said. "Regardless of the size of the stockpile, it doesn't change the need to have the capacity to produce them (pits)."

McCoy said Los Alamos is not on the list of possible locations for the pit-production facility, while many observers have cited the DOE's Savannah River site in South Carolina as the most likely choice. Nonetheless, Cutler said, all DOE sites are on the table.

From the Natural Resource Defense Council's perspective, the fact that Los Alamos should be able to produce up to 50 pits annually is more than enough security. If more capacity is needed for some reason, the lab could double its capacity, according to Paine. The DOE could also focus on methods of resurfacing the current pit stockpile — as opposed to making hundreds of new ones.

In the end, Paine and others say the only use for a pit facility like that proposed would be for mass replacement of the entire nuclear arsenal — or perhaps to build an entirely new warhead. Rather than pour money into a new pit facility, Paine suggests that NNSA build a modest pit-resurfacing facility at the DOE's Pantex Plant near Amarillo, Texas, where most of the pits are stored.

"The sensible alternative to building all this capacity to build new pits is to have a facility to recycle the pits that we have got," Paine said.

LANL In Line For New Building

Safety Problems Plague Structure

By Mark Oswald
Of the Journal

Initial steps have been taken toward a major project to replace a huge, half-century-old nuclear-weapons research building at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham last week authorized the first stages of planning for replacement of the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research (CMR) Building — a two-story, 550,000-square-foot structure that is LANL's largest building and which has been plagued by safety problems in recent years.

According to LANL's Public Affairs Office, Abraham signed a memorandum authorizing the lab to hire an architecture/engineering firm for preliminary design of the new building and to begin preparing a detailed hazards analysis.

He also authorized the Department of Energy to begin work on an environmental impact statement and to schedule public "scoping" meetings. Those will be held in Pojoaque and Los Alamos next month.

Replacement of the CMR Building — which has a core mission of analytical chemistry on plutonium and other weapons material — has been a topic of discussion for several years.

Previous cost estimates for replacing the structure have run into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

John Gordon, head of the National Nuclear Safety Administration, or NNSA, said during a visit to New Mexico last year that the CMR Building has "got to be replaced."

In 1996, there was an explosion in the building. In 1997, operations were shut down for a couple of months after federal inspectors demanded measures to ease safety problems. An earthquake fault was discovered under the CMR Building in 1998.

But nuclear disarmament and LANL watchdog groups are expected to raise questions about the replacement project.

They've argued that a new weapons lab for Los Alamos in the post-Cold War era is just as unnecessary now as in 1990, when Congress killed plans for a $385 million Special Nuclear Material Laboratory at Los Alamos.

"Basically they're looking at positioning the lab to handle more plutonium work and

See **LANL** *on* **PAGE 3**

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LANL in Line for New Building

from **PAGE 1**

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"Why can't Los Alamos use the plutonium facility it has?" Mello asked, referring to another existing structure. "Why do they have to build another one?"

LANL's public affairs teams said the lab has worked for more than a year to develop plans and define the mission requirements for a new building that would replace CMR, which opened its doors in 1952.

CMR houses research and experimental activities for analytical chemistry, plutonium and uranium chemistry and metallurgy, among other functions.

According to LANL, preliminary planning for a replacement CMR facility has focused on using a much smaller area for laboratories — about 20 percent as large — plus a separate office building. In early planning, the lab has examined the feasibility of locating the new building at LANL's Technical Area 55 because of the advantages of consolidated security for the replacement CMR and the existing plutonium facility.

LANL has budgeted $16.4 million to complete the conceptual design phase of the project. Spending so far on early planning has been about $3 million.

LANL said no decision to proceed with construction of a CMR replacement will be made prior to a complete environmental review.

The National Nuclear Safety Administration has published notice in the Federal Register of its intention to prepare the environmental impact statement for the project.

The notice says that public comment on the plans will be accepted by DOE through Aug. 31. There will be two public meetings for comments and questions, 4-8 p.m. Aug. 13 at the Cities of Gold Hotel in Pojoaque and 4-8 p.m. Aug. 15 at Fuller Lodge in Los Alamos.

In 1992, the Department of Energy started a series of upgrades to the CMR Building that were intended to extend its useful life as long as 30 more years. But several safety issues surfaced — including the discovery of an earthquake fault beneath the building.

In 1998, DOE downsized the planned improvements to only those needed to insure safety of continued operations through 2010. A Clinton administration budget in 2000 sought $13 million to finish the upgrades, to bring the upgrade costs over about a decade to $128 million.

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LANL In Line For New Building

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LANL on Plutonium Plant List

By Mark Oswald Of the Journal

Domenici: Lab Not Right Fit

One of Los Alamos National Laboratory's most enthusiastic and influential boosters Sen. Pete Domenici is downplaying the idea of LANL becoming the home of a huge new facility for manufacturing the plutonium cores of nuclear weapons.

Friday, the Los Alamos lab officially was named a possible site for a plant to manufacture plutonium pits, which trigger the first stage of a nuclear weapon blast.

The U.S. Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration announced it will evaluate five DOE locations for the so-called Modern Pit Facility Los Alamos, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad, the Savannah River Site in South Carolina, the Nevada Test Site and the Pantex Plant near Amarillo.

But in a news release this week, Domenici, R-N.M., suggested Los Alamos is not the right spot for the pit plant, which is expected to cost up to $4 billion, be online by 2020 and create jobs for as many as 1,500 people.

Domenici a champion for LANL funding and operations over the years noted the Los Alamos lab already is developing an interim pit production operation, intended to make a small number of pits by 2007. But the senator's news release said "it is unlikely that a large manufacturing operation would be a good match to the research focus at the lab."

"I anticipate that further study will decide against locating this capability at Los Alamos, which could enhance the prospects for Carlsbad," Domenici said.

A LANL spokesman had no comment on the senator's remarks. A lab representative earlier this week declined to say whether LANL is actively lobbying for the permanent pit production plant.

Domenici spokesman Chris Gallegos said Domenici's comments "just reflect the senator's view that he has developed over time that Los Alamos probably wouldn't be the best site for a manufacturing facility, because it's mainly a research facility."

Research "is the primary focus at Los Alamos and where its growth will be over time," Gallegos said.

Nuclear weapons pits have not been produced in this country since the DOE's Rocky Flats Plant in Colorado was shut down in 1989. The need for a new pit production facility was recommended in the Bush administration's Nuclear Posture Review, which argued that the nation's nuclear deterrent capabilities are compromised by a lack of plutonium pit production capability.

Los Alamos' current interim pit production operation is intended to recapture the capability to make the plutonium weapons cores and then transfer what's learned to the new permanent manufacturing facility.

Greg Mello of Santa Fe, head of the anti-nuclear Los Alamos Study Group, said Friday that LANL "hasn't been all that enthusiastic about the larger-scale pit production mission." He said LANL has always cared more about research and the "lavish" funding it brings than the production side of the nation's weapons complex.

Mello also said a large pit production plant could jeopardize LANL's relationship with the University of California, which has the federal contract to run the lab.

"Now, the university's role at the lab can be styled for sale in California as research and development," Mello said. "There is a political risk if UCal, already the best-funded developer of weapons of mass destruction, becomes a large-scale manufacturer of WMDs as well."

He said it's better politically in California and among the UCal faculty for LANL to remain just "a boutique pit manufacturer."

Friday's announcement by the National Nuclear Security Administration said the agency is beginning preparation of an environmental impact statement in preparation for development of the permanent pit plant.

The environmental review is intended to provide information on whether to actually proceed with plans for the new plant and where to locate it.

"The EIS also will evaluate the no-action alternative of maintaining current plutonium pit capabilities at LANL and the reasonableness of upgrading the existing facilities at LANL to increase pit production capability," the NNSA said.

A public "scoping" meeting for the NNSA's environmental review will be held 7-10 p.m. Oct. 24 at the Duane W. Smith Auditorium, 1400 Diamond Dr., in Los Alamos. The NNSA also is accepting written comment for 60 days.

PHOTO: Color

DOMENICI: Anticipates study will decide against Los Alamos

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL

FRIDAY
October 25, 2002

North EDITION

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Day of the Dead
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VENUE NORTH

Hunt for Sniper Appears Over

Rifle Found With Suspects Linked to 11 Attacks

PAGE A1

Doctor Wants Nuke Pits at LANL

Need for Plant Questioned

By Adam Rankin
Journal Staff Writer

LOS ALAMOS — Only one person out of 13 submitting comments on the proposed new nuclear weapons facility that could end up at Los Alamos National Laboratory said he wanted the factory to be in Los Alamos.

Miles Nelson, a physician in Santa Fe, said he wanted the proposed modern pit facility, where plutonium cores that serve as triggers for nuclear weapons would be built, to be located in Los Alamos.

"Having it here would help these people understand they are involved in the immorality of nuclear weapons at a very critical level," he said, because scientists at Los Alamos are otherwise "aloof" from the dirty business of nuclear weapons.

Miles and about 45 people turned out for an environmental scoping meeting in Los Alamos sponsored by the National Nuclear Security Administration to evaluate potential sites for the proposed modern pit facility.

Many of the people making comments, including laboratory watchdog groups, called into question the need for a new pit manufacturing facility.

The Department of Energy and NNSA say the facility is needed to replace aging plutonium pits.

Since Colorado's Rocky Flats facility was unexpectedly closed in 1989 because of environmental concerns, the United States has not had the ability to mass produce plutonium pits.

NNSA officials said pits slowly degrade through radioactive decay to the point that they no longer meet narrow nuclear weapons specifications. But exactly how long that takes is unknown.

Jerry Freedman, NNSA director of the pit facility project, said planning a modern pit facility now is part of a prudent risk management strategy to replace old pits as they become nonfunctional.

The question of a new mod-

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Doctor Wants Nuke Pits At LANL

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ern pit facility heated up when Los Alamos National Laboratory was fingered in a Department of Energy technical review as the best site for the pit facility from a list four other possible sites, including Carlsbad's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant.

Other possible locations include the Savanah River site in South Carolina, the Nevada Test Site near Las Vegas and the Pantex Plant near Amarillo, Texas.

Michael Mitchell, NNSA manager for the pit project, said the final location for the facility will be determined by April 2004 and a final decision on whether to build will come in 2011.

The facility, which would begin manufacturing pits by 2018, would cost between $2 billion and $4 billion and $200 million to $300 million to operate each year.

Mitchell said the facility would build a minimum of 125 pits per year but would be capable of producing as many as 400 pits per year and would employ about 1,000 workers.

Freedman said NNSA and DOE are doing aging experiments to determine how long the pits remain viable — current estimates range from 45 to 60 years — but no firm time frame has been established.

If planning the pit facility isn't started now, the government may not be able to ensure the viability of the nation's nuclear stockpile later, especially if pits don't last as long as anticipated, he said.

"What if we find surprises in the next few years?" he said.

Several nuclear watch groups called into question the need for a new pit facility, given recent nuclear disarmament treaties and a program to build pits already in place at Los Alamos.

Jay Coghlan, director of Nuclear Watch of New Mexico, said there is no evidence to suggest aging pits in weapons or in storage will become unusable anytime soon and that the aging argument is a "grand excuse."

"If there was news in the form of yes, there are demonstrable aging affects, then I think we would hear about it," he said.

Coghlan said the motivation for building a new pit facility is not about maintaining the viability of the nation's nuclear stockpile, but about designing new weapons.

He cited the government's 2001 Nuclear Posture Review and other DOE reports, which explicitly state the intent to develop new pit designs.

But Freedman said NNSA has not been directed to create new pit designs, just replace old ones.

Jay Rose, NNSA's environmental manager for the pit project, said part of the environmental review includes looking at an upgrade at a current LANL pit production facility at Technical Area 55, which was designated an interim pit production facility in 1996.

NNSA's Mitchell said TA-55 is slated to produce as many as 20 pits in a year, but so far only research-grade pits have been produced. He said the first weapons-grade pits should be produced by April 2003.

Greg Mello, of the Los Alamos Study Group, said a new facility isn't needed because LANL can produce sufficient pits, given the reduced nuclear stockpile.

"We believe that LANL has or could have more capacity than they say already," he said.

DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY

LA MONITOR 10/26/02

Forum discusses plutonium pit facility and production

◆ *Public scoping session begins process of building a plutonium pit factory at one of five locations, possibly Los Alamos*

By ROGER SNODGRASS
roger@lamonitor.com
Monitor Assistant Editor

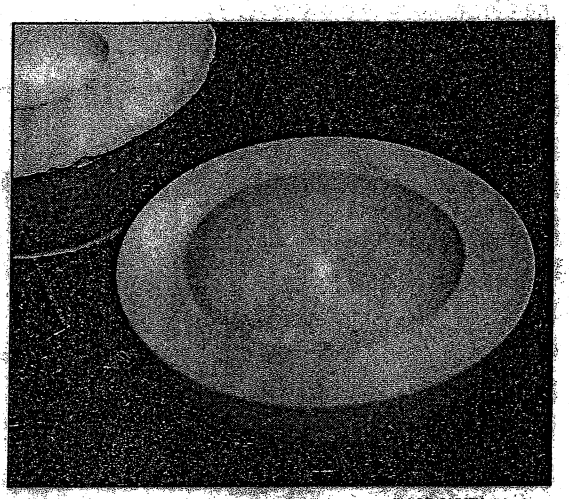
Sometime in the future, about 15 years from now, the Department of Energy anticipates the possibility of needing a place to make at least 125 and perhaps as many as 400 plutonium pits per year.

Whether to do that, and more to the point, where to do it, was the subject of a public scoping meeting in Los Alamos Thursday night.

It was evidently not a concern of the people of Los Alamos, however, as only one person out of a dozen or so making public comments identified herself as a Los Alamos resident.

Los Alamos National Laboratory is among the final five candidates selected for consideration in an early screening process that gave Los Alamos the highest rating, not surprising considering that the lab is the only place where some pits are now being made and will be made in small lots of 10 per year by 2007.

But Jay Rose, DOE's official in charge of the NEPA process, said reports in the press about that had been misleading.



JIM O'DONNELL/Monitor

READY FOR PIT A simulated hemisphere seen at the Bradbury Science Museum would hold the pit of a bomb.

"We did a site screening study. We put forth some values and used the study to weed out sites that weren't usable," he said. "Los Alamos did score highest, but now we're starting over."

Ounce for ounce, the plutonium pit, the critical component that ignites a nuclear weapon, may well be the most valuable and most fearsome manufactured product in the world.

One pit, the first one turned out in LANL's stop-gap interim pit production, supposed to crank into action around 2007, will cost almost $2 billion according to one estimate. The next nine pits to be made that year, assuming no additional expenses, would run $174 million a piece.

The Modern Pit Facility, the proposition that was scoped Thursday, would cost at least the $3 billion construction budget for the first pit. With an annual budget of $200 to $300 million a year, future pits could be done at a bargain price per pit of a few million for the minimum annual output.

Pit production in the nuclear complex is also one of the functions held in extremely ill repute, thanks in

Please see **PLUTONIUM**, *6*

PLUTONIUM

From Page 1

part to the summary shutdown of the last pit factory at Rocky Flats, after years of public protest capped by a raid led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Environmental Protection Administration in 1989.

The closure has been followed by a decade of disclosure about how careless the facility managed its waste and costly efforts to clean up afterward with virtually no end in sight.

Mike Mitchell, DOE's project manager for the MPF, was asked about Rocky Flats, after the basic outlines of the staged 15-year resumption of plutonium pit production were presented.

One of his slides had a bullet that said, "Rocky Flats was unexpectedly shut down in 1989," but Mitchell dropped the word "unexpectedly," in his reading.

Mitchell said, "A lot has changed since it was built in 1952," in an atmosphere that "prioritized production over environmental safety and health." A new facility would benefit from the lessons that have been learned and would be bolstered by more oversight today, he said.

Citizen groups and antinuclear crusaders pelted the concept of an MPF from nearly every angle, scolding the advocates repeatedly on moral ground.

There were however, a number of technical comments.

In prepared remarks, the Los Alamos Study Group invoked Article VI of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, ratified in 1970, that calls upon signatories "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and an early date to nuclear disarmament."

The DOE officials indicated that this would be addressed in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement that will be prepared by next spring, but their short answer was that progress was being made in fulfilling the treaty.

Joni Arends, waste project director for Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, followed up on the treaty issue, asking, "Why are you building up at the same time as we are building down?" She asked for a full assessment of plans for water uses in the facility if it were to be built at Los Alamos, and for a redacted (edited for security purposes) version of any other documents underlying the project.

Jay Coghlan, director of Nuclear Watch of New Mexico criticized a publicized LANL experiment in forced aging or spiking plutonium pits, in an effort to determine how long currently stockpiled pits will last, as lacking scientific validity.

He advised the DOE to pursue the No Action alternative, to do nothing about adding pit-making capacity to the current stockpiles. Since the US has pledged with Russia, he said, to reduce the number of warheads down to 2,000, there should not be a need.

A physician, Miles Nelson, said he hoped the plutonium facility would be built in Los Alamos, as a kind of retribution.

"I'd like to see it here, where the culture began," he said.

Other sites under consideration are the Waste Isolation Pilot Project in Carlsbad, the Nevada Test Site, the Pantex plant in Amarillo, Texas, and the Savannah River Site in South Carolina.

The selection of a site is not expected before 2004, with a go-ahead for construction scheduled in 2011 and mission start-up around 2017.

Journal North
11.10.02

OTHER VOICES

Why Make More Plutonium Pits?

By Greg Mello

The Department of Energy has proposed building a new factory for the manufacture of plutonium pits, the cores of the first stage of nuclear weapons. Why?

The U.S. has today roughly 24,000 plutonium pits. About 10,600 are in nuclear weapons; there are also some 14,000 pits in storage near Amarillo. Of the pits in storage, approximately 5,000 have been earmarked for reuse; the other 9,000 pits may work just fine as well.

Officials at the nuclear labs say pits last for a minimum of 45 to 60 years, and probably decades longer, if not longer still. Since the oldest pits in the stockpile were made in about 1970, these oldest pits could begin to fail in 2015 at the earliest, using the most conservative information available publicly.

By that time, over two-thirds of the weapons in the U.S. arsenal will no longer be deployed. The recent U.S.-Russian agreement will remove some 6,446 warheads of varying ages from deployed status by the end of 2012, not counting any reductions in tactical weapons that may also take place. The pits in those inactive weapons represent a "hedge" against pit aging in the remaining deployed weapons, which will by then consist of 2,200 strategic weapons and no more than 1,160 tactical weapons.

This is a huge pit reserve, and a quite modern one too — and all the pits in it are fully tested and certified already, unlike the ones that would be made in a new factory.

Even if this somehow weren't enough, Los Alamos could make more than enough pits. For several years now, Los Alamos has been paid princely sums to create, in part of its existing plutonium facility, a manufacturing capacity for 50 pits per year, or 80 pits/year with multiple shifts, a capacity that Los Alamos once said it already had.

The lab space involved is modest, and these manufacturing rates could be doubled within the existing facility by retiring obsolete and unnecessary projects.

Aside from being completely unnecessary, DOE's proposed factory raises other troubling issues. In 1970, the United States ratified the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), the cornerstone of the world's nonproliferation regime. Article VI obligates nuclear-weapon states "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament."

There are two important norms here: "do not improve nuclear weapons," and "do not possess them" — whether it is continuous non-possession (by most countries), or eventual non-possession (by the five countries recognized as nuclear-weapon states in the treaty). Our obligation to disarm was emphasized by the International Court of Justice in 1996, which unanimously ruled, "There exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control." The U.S. recommitted itself to this principle as recently as May 2000 when, along with the other nuclear-weapons states, it agreed to "an unequivocal undertaking by the nuclear weapon states to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament to which all States and parties are committed under Article VI." The proposal to build a new pit factory is an affront to these obligations, especially given the huge pit reserve, much of it modern, and the known minimum longevity of pits.

Taking these and other facts in hand, one can only conclude that the primary purpose of this facility is to make types of pits that do not now exist — that is, new weapons. These new weapons would likely have to be tested in full-up nuclear explosive tests, a reality that senior officials at the labs and DOE have recently begun to unveil to the public.

The new facility is supposed to cost $2 billion to $4 billion to build, but there will also be operating costs, plus the costs of waste disposal, security, transportation, and final decommissioning and cleanup, among other costs. It would not be surprising if the total life-cycle cost reached $30 billion or more.

At Rocky Flats, which made pits from 1952 to 1989, cleanup will cost very roughly $10 billion, not including long-term monitoring and care.

Even after spending this much, the widespread soil contamination at the site will probably never be cleaned up. While the proposed new plant likely would not be as contaminating and dangerous as "Rocky" was, this cannot be guaranteed. New (or newly appreciated) hazards such as terrorism and sabotage have risen as risk factors, even as other risks have purportedly declined. The hazard from terrorist attack at such a facility cannot be easily bounded, and the steps necessary to prevent terrorism and sabotage will make such a facility a poor place to work, not even considering the intrinsic medical and moral hazards of working there.

For all these reasons and more, attempts over the last decade to construct a new plutonium pit factory have been highly controversial, both in New Mexico and nationally. They should be. DOE's plan is neither "modern" nor smart, and if allowed to go forward it will gravely damage our national security, in every way that phrase can be interpreted.

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