



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE, February 11, 2026

Contact: Jay Coghlan, 505.989.7342, c. 505.470.3154, jay[at]nukewatch.org
Scott Kovac, 505.316.4148, scott[at]nukewatch.org

The Future of Los Alamos Lab: More Nuclear Weapons or Cleanup?

New Mexico Environment Department Issues Corrective Action Order

Santa Fe, NM – In its own words, “The New Mexico Environment Department [NMED] issued several actions today to hold the U.S. Department of Energy accountable for failing to prioritize the cleanup of Los Alamos National Laboratory’s “legacy waste” for disposal at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant.”

Amongst these actions is an Administrative Compliance Order designed to hasten cleanup of an old radioactive and toxic waste dump that should be the model for Lab cleanup. Nuclear Watch New Mexico strongly supports NMED’s aggressive efforts to compel comprehensive cleanup given Department of Energy obstruction.

This Compliance Order comes at a historically significant time. On February 5 the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty expired, leaving the world without any arms control for the first time since the middle 1970s. The following day the Trump Administration accused China of conducting a small nuclear weapons test in 2020, possibly opening the door for matching tests by the United States.

NMED’s Compliance Order comes as LANL’s nuclear weapons production programs are radically expanding for the new nuclear arms race. The directors of the nuclear weapons laboratories, including LANL’s Thom Mason, are openly [talking](#) about seizing the opportunity provided by the Trump Administration’s deregulation of nuclear safety regulations to accelerate nuclear warhead production.

As background, in September 2023 NMED released a groundbreaking draft Order mandating the excavation and cleanup of an estimated 198,000 cubic meters of radioactive and toxic wastes at Material Disposal Area C, an old unlined dump that last received wastes in 1974. However, in a legalistic maneuver to evade real cleanup, DOE unilaterally [declared](#) that Area C:

“...is associated with active Facility operations and will be Deferred from further corrective action under [NMED’s] Consent Order until it is no longer associated with active Facility operations.”

The rationale of DOE’s semi-autonomous nuclear weapons agency, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), is that Area C is within a few hundred yards of the Lab’s main facility for plutonium “pit” bomb core production. LANL is prioritizing that production above everything else while cutting cleanup and nonproliferation programs and completely eliminating renewable energy research. DOE’s and NNSA’s unilateral deferment of Area C until it “is no longer associated with active Facility operations” in effect means that it will never be cleaned up. No future plutonium pit production is to maintain the safety and reliability of the U.S.’ existing

nuclear weapons stockpile. Instead, it is all for new design nuclear weapons for the new arms race that the NNSA intends to produce until at least 2050. Further, new-design nuclear weapons could prompt the United States to resume full-scale testing, which would have disastrous international proliferation consequences.

To break up the legalistic log jam around cleanup of Area C, NMED's new Administrative Compliance Order orders DOE, NNSA, and their contractors to:

- 1) Provide within 30 days specific justifications for their unilateral "deferment" of an old radioactive and toxic waste dump from cleanup; and
- 2) Rescind their withdrawal of a 2021 "Corrective Measures Evaluation" (CME) which proposed possible cleanup methods. DOE had claimed that withdrawing the CME had mooted any legal basis for NMED to mandate comprehensive cleanup at LANL.

The Lab's budget for nuclear weapons programs that caused the need for cleanup has more than doubled over the last decade, with a one billion dollar increase in this year alone. Nevertheless, DOE et al want cleanup on the cheap. Their plan is to "cap and cover" existing wastes, leaving them permanently buried in unlined pit and trenches as a perpetual threat to groundwater.

Ironically, there is no current need for pit production. In 2006 independent experts [concluded](#) that plutonium pits have serviceable lifetimes of at least 100 years (their average age now is ~43). Moreover, at least 20,000 existing pits are already stored at the NNSA's Pantex Plant near Amarillo, TX.

Pit production is the NNSA's most complex and expensive program ever. It will likely cost more than \$60 billion over the next 25 years, exceeding the cost of the original Manhattan Project that designed and built a plutonium pit from scratch. However, the independent Government Accountability Office has repeatedly [concluded](#) that the NNSA has no credible cost estimates and no "Integrated Master Schedule" for planned redundant pit production at LANL and the Savannah River Site in South Carolina.

In addition, it's not clear where an estimated [57,500 cubic meters of radioactive transuranic wastes from future pit production](#) will go. DOE is fundamentally [changing the cleanup mission](#) of the only existing permanent repository, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in southern New Mexico, to become the dumping ground for new nuclear bomb production. However, WIPP is already oversubscribed for all of the radioactive wastes that DOE wants to send to it. Moreover, NMED has previously ordered DOE to prioritize disposal of LANL's Cold War wastes at WIPP (which it is not doing) and to begin looking for a new out-of-state waste dump, which will be politically controversial.

In all, NNSA's expanded plutonium pit production is so plagued with problems that the DOE Deputy Secretary ordered a "[special assessment](#)" of the program completed by December 8, 2025. However, it is still not publicly available.

LANL and DOE have a long history of deception concerning contamination and cleanup. In 1992 a Lab pamphlet was inserted into the Sunday edition of *The New Mexican* newspaper which claimed that plutonium from LANL had never been found in the Rio Grande. This was

despite the fact that a [1987 study](#) detected Lab plutonium 17 miles south down the Rio Grande in Cochiti Lake, a popular recreational site.

As late as the late 1990s LANL was claiming that groundwater contamination was impossible, going so far as to request a waiver from even having to monitor for it (fortunately denied by NMED). Today we know of a massive hexavalent chromium plume whose size is still not known that has migrated onto San Ildefonso Pueblo lands (Lab maps showed it stopping at exactly the Pueblo border). Plutonium, high explosives and perchlorates have all been detected in groundwater. A [2005 hydrogeological study](#) concluded that “Future contamination at additional locations is expected over a period of decades to centuries as more of the contaminant inventory reaches the water table.”

In 2018 DOE was [falsely claiming](#) that cleanup at the Lab was more than half complete. In Nuclear Watch New Mexico’s view, genuine cleanup of LANL has yet to begin. It will start with a final Order by NMED to DOE mandating excavation and treatment of the radioactive and toxic wastes at Area C. Lab-wide comprehensive cleanup is the only sure way to protect New Mexico’s life-sustaining groundwater and will provide hundreds of long-term, high paying jobs.

Jay Coghlan, Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, commented: “What is more important to New Mexicans, clean, uncontaminated groundwater or more nuclear weapons for the accelerating global arms race? We salute NMED’s efforts under the leadership of Secretary James Kenney to hold the Lab accountable and make it genuinely clean up. This enforcement action is a crucial step toward reining in Lab contamination. But it is also a global step in forcing the Los Alamos Lab to focus on cleanup instead of the buildup of nuclear weapons for another arms race that threatens us all.”

###

The New Mexico Environment Department’s Corrective Action Order is available at <https://www.env.nm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/2026-02-11-LANL-MDA-C-ACO.pdf>

For more, please see Nuclear Watch New Mexico’s fact sheet on Area C, *The Future of Los Alamos Lab: More Nuclear Weapons or Cleanup?* at <https://nukewatch.org/area-c-fact-sheet/>

For more on plutonium pit production, please see <https://nukewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Plutonium-Pit-Production-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

This press release is online at <https://nukewatch.org/area-c-nmed-corrective-action-order/>

This work is made possible through the generous support of **PLOUGHSHARES**