



Congress Calls Los Alamos' New, Expensive Plutonium Lab "Simply Irrational"

Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) is already the second largest production site in the U.S. nuclear weapons complex. During its history, the Lab has released hazardous chemical and radioactive contamination to the air, soil, and water. Funding for cleanup at LANL pales in comparison to nuclear weapons programs, and is less than 1% of LANL's total budget, while weapons activities are 66%. Yet, for fiscal year (FY) 2007, the President requested over \$112 million to fund construction of LANL's new advanced plutonium facility, the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Project (CMRR). Official cost estimates for this 400,000 square foot project range up to \$1 billion.

The CMRR would replace the old Chemistry and Metallurgy Research (CMR) Building, which was constructed in 1952. This 550,000 square foot building houses operations that analyze and assay radioactive metals, such as highly enriched uranium and plutonium, used in nuclear weapons production. However, it is not located at the Lab's Technical Area-55, the site for plutonium pit production. The new CMRR is to be built adjacent, and linked via underground tunnel to the Lab's pit production facility (TA-55). In the past, LANL has called construction of the CMRR at TA-55 "the keystone to the creation of a nuclear campus."

A plutonium pit is the primary, or "trigger", of a nuclear weapon. LANL is the only DOE site in the weapons complex currently able to produce pits. Current plans are to increase "interim" pit production at Los Alamos from 10 pits per year to up to 50. This increased capacity will support the proposed next generation of U.S. nuclear weapons under the so-called Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) Program. The decision has not yet been made if and how to proceed with RRW. Logically, CMRR should be put on hold at least until RRW is a well-defined program. But there are yet other reasons to put CMRR on hold.

"Simply Irrational" - the House of Representatives Calls for Termination of CMRR

In a stunning move, in May 2006 the House Energy and Water Development Appropriations Subcommittee cut FY 2007 construction funding for CMRR from the requested \$112 million to \$12 million. Congressional pressure is forcing the nuclear weapons complex to meet post-9.11 security concerns and lower costs by designing a single future "consolidated plutonium production center" at a site yet to be determined. All large quantities of weapons-grade nuclear materials are to be relocated from Los Alamos to that consolidated center by 2022. Construction of the CMRR is not scheduled to be finished until 2014. As the House Subcommittee put it, "CMRR will serve its primary production support function for only eight years before it is made obsolete by the new [consolidated] plutonium facility... The Committee finds this type of planning simply irrational." The Committee directed the Department of Energy to terminate CMRR and instead co-locate all major plutonium operations at a single site.

The Committee further noted that a billion dollar investment in the CMRR at Los Alamos only makes sense if the future consolidated plutonium production center itself is to be located there. This distinctly raises the possibility that long-term plutonium pit production could remain

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551 W. Cordova Rd. Santa Fe, NM, 87505
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and be dramatically expanded at the Lab. The nuclear weaponeers ultimately want the production of around 125 pits per year to, in their words, re-establish the “level of capability comparable to what we had during the Cold War.”



Shaky Ground

In the late 1990's, a seismic fault was discovered under the old CMR Building and necessary upgrades to address the seismic threat were judged to be cost prohibitive. This is no surprise, since the ground under LANL is laced with fault zones. However, the new CMRR will be built between two fault zones and 20 feet above a layer of structurally weak volcanic ash. Lab geologic maps indicate that the nearest fault is only some 2,000 feet from the planned CMRR location. To replace one plutonium facility because of seismic concerns with another that has similar concerns displays shaky logic.

Current construction technologies may be able to compensate, but at great cost. The Bechtel Corp., now co-managing the Lab with the University of California, is mired in the construction of a new vitrification plant at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington State. That facility's mission is to emplace very dangerous high-level radioactive waste in glass. Because the gravity of seismic concerns was initially overlooked, the cost of this project has risen from \$4.3 billion to \$11 billion and counting. Bechtel has a “design/build” contract to build the plant, which is the same type of contract for CMRR construction. Design/build means that the same contractor designs and builds the facility, which can lead to cutting corners and lack of oversight in the soundness of both design and construction. DOE has cautioned, "design-build can be used most successfully with projects that have well-defined requirements, are not complex, and have limited risks." The magnitude, complexity, and inherent risks of CMRR do not satisfy that rule.

What You Can Do – Request Senator Domenici Cut Funding for CMRR

Senator Pete Domenici, long an ardent proponent for funding to New Mexico's labs, chairs the Senate Subcommittee for Energy and Water Development Appropriations. Before final funding levels are established, House appropriations need to be reconciled with Senate appropriations. Given the House's cut to CMRR construction, Senate restoration of its funding under Domenici's leadership could be a crucial test toward determining the Lab's future as the nation's consolidated plutonium production center.

Senator Domenici can't have it both ways. He needs to either drop his support for the CMRR project, or acknowledge that Los Alamos is destined to become this country's super plutonium pit production center. This will be a test of whether his loyalties are really to New Mexicans, or whether it is to the expanding nuclear weapons industry. He will clarify his position by whether he funds a new, expensive plutonium lab at Los Alamos, or not.

Your help is needed now to stop this irrational nuclear weapons facility.

Please email Senator Domenici at: <http://domenici.senate.gov/contact/contactform.cfm>

Or call 505.988-6511 to request that the Senator cuts funding for CMRR.

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