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New Defense Guidance Undermines Need for New Nuclear Weapons Plutonium Facility at Los Alamos

This morning at the Pentagon President Barak Obama and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta released a new defense strategy reflecting the end of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the need to achieve more than \$450 billion in budget savings over the next decade. While specific military programs were not marked for cuts, the strategy document “U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense” notes that “It is possible that our deterrence goals can be achieved with a smaller nuclear force, which would reduce the number of nuclear weapons in our inventory as well as their role in U.S. national security strategy.”

This has direct bearing on whether the controversial “Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement (CMRR) Project-Nuclear Facility” should go forward or not at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). The Lab first proposed a similar project to replace the old and dangerous Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Building in 1990, which Congress rejected because of the lack of need given the end of the Cold War.

Twenty-two years later the same remains true. There is no need for the CMRR Nuclear Facility, whose main purpose will be to support the quadrupling of production at LANL of plutonium pits – the fissile cores of nuclear weapons - from the currently approved level of 20 pits per year to up to 80.

NNSA first requested congressional funding for the CMRR Project in 2004. Not coincidentally, at the same time the agency was also aggressively pushing for new design nuclear weapons, the so-called Reliable Replacement Warheads. These new nuclear warheads would have required the expanded plutonium pit production that the Nuclear Facility was to directly support.

Also in 2004 Nuclear Watch New Mexico asked Senator Jeff Bingaman for a study on plutonium pit lifetimes, which he successfully required in federal legislation. In November 2006 independent experts concluded that plutonium pits last 85 years or more, whereas NNSA had previously claimed they were reliable only on the order of 45 years. This finding had much to do with undermining the claimed need for the new-design Reliable Replacement Warheads, and Congress subsequently axed that program.

Additionally, CMRR's estimated costs have exploded from \$660 million in 2004 to nearly \$6 billion today, largely due to increased awareness of serious and complex seismic issues at Los Alamos.

In sum, plutonium pits last more than twice as long as previously believed, there is no need for expanded plutonium pit production (in fact LANL has zero stockpile pit production currently scheduled), there are serious seismic issues, and the CMRR Project is exorbitantly expensive which the nation can ill afford. The missions of the old CMR Building can be relocated to the CMRR Project's already built first phase, the 185,000 square feet Rad Lab, and the Lab's existing plutonium pit production facility, without building the Nuclear Facility.

Jay Coghlan, NukeWatch Director, commented, "We welcome the Administration's acknowledgment that massive budget savings much be achieved and that our nuclear forces could be further reduced. Cancelling the CMRR-Nuclear Facility is one way to begin to achieve both, immediately saving around 5 billion dollars. More importantly, cancelling the CMRR-Facility is also a decision to not expand plutonium pit production, when expansion is simply not needed and would be inconsistent with America's global nonproliferation goals. Hundred's of billions of dollars could be saved over the next half-century by not expanding plutonium pit production to produce new nuclear weapons, when that money is badly needed for true national priorities."

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U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense is available at - <http://t.co/Q07sC8H3> (quote is at pg. 5)

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