nuclear watch new mexico

LANL Expands Nuclear Bomb Production, Rejects Cleanup, Still Plans to Release Tritium

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Santa Fe, NM - Eighty years after the first radioactive waste was buried at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), Lab officials have released plans to "defer" cleanup of one of the older radioactive dumps. Material Disposal Area C ("Area C") is an 11.8-acre site that was active from 1948 to 1974. It contains metals, hazardous constituents, and radioactively and chemically contaminated materials in six unlined disposal pits and 108 shafts. The total waste and fill in the pits and shafts are estimated at 198,104 cubic meters. Area C also has a serious gas plume of industrial solvents. Given the amount of long-lived plutonium wastes that are likely to be in Area C, leaving it buried 25 feet deep in a landfill rated for only 1,000 years is not acceptable.

On June 18, 2025, the Department of Energy (DOE) sent the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) a letter outlining its plans to "defer corrective action" (i.e. cleanup) at Area C. It stated that the dump "is associated with active Facility operations and will be deferred from further corrective action under [NMED's] Consent Order [governing cleanup] until MDA C is no longer associated with active Facility operations."

DOE's letter does not state why it wants the change or what "active Facility operations" are. However, that is not difficult to guess as Area C is within a few hundred yards of PF-4, LANL's main plutonium facility that is gearing up for the expanded production of plutonium pit bomb cores. As co-plaintiff, Nuclear Watch New Mexico legally forced the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) to undertake a nationwide programmatic environmental impact statement for pit production, which the agency chose to give a fifty year time horizon. In combination this means that DOE and LANL are seeking to indefinitely postpone cleanup while expanding nuclear weapons production on into the future.

Fortunately, NMED has responded that it "will utilize to the fullest extent all statutory and legal authority necessary to enforce the requirements of the 2016 CO [Consent Order] in order to ensure that New Mexicans receive effective cleanup of legacy contamination at LANL in a timely manner."

The Environment Department went on to say:

> "DOE continues to respond to the regulatory direction provided by NMED in ways that do not reflect any good faith efforts to be accountable for cleanup of the legacy waste at Los Alamos National Laboratory and, in fact, are directly contradictory to the assertations previously made by DOE. As you may recall, during the substantial negotiation process in 2023-24 for revision of the Consent Order, DOE repeatedly reiterated its desire to work collaboratively and effectively with NMED. This recent example of an improper, unilateral deferral contrary to the terms of the Consent Order, along with the bad-faith withdrawal of the CME [Corrective Measures Evaluation to initiate cleanup] Report, contradict such assertions and reassurances from DOE."

At the same time DOE and LANL are still seeking to intentionally release up to 30,000 curies of tritium, which has been highly controversial. Tritium is a radioactive isotope of hydrogen that can be easily absorbed by the body as tritiated water. Instead of complying with a NMED order to organize an independent expert panel and a public meeting on the subject, they have invoked a dispute resolution process under the Consent Order. This is the kind of forum in which taxpayer supported lawyers from DOE and LANL can try to run circles around NMED's limited staff and resources.

Overarching above all is LANL's vast expansion of its nuclear weapons programs. A full billion dollars is being added in FY 2026 (which begins this October 1), making 84% of LANL's $6 billion dollar annual budget directly tied to nuclear weapons. This increase is primarily for:

> 1) New-design nuclear weapons that can't be tested because of the international testing moratorium; or, conversely, could prompt the U.S. to resume testing, with serious global proliferation consequences; and
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> 2) Expanded plutonium pit bomb core production for these new-design nuclear weapons. This is ill-conceived because no future production is to maintain the existing stockpile. Independent experts have found that pits last at least a century and at least 15,000 existing pits are already in storage.

In contrast, cleanup and nonproliferation programs are being cut by 5%, non-weapons science by 50%, and renewables energies research completely eliminated.

Scott Kovac, Research Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico commented, "LANL and DOE once again treat New Mexico as their nuclear colony with their radioactive releases, obstruction of cleanup and expansion of nuclear weapons programs. The day will come when this is no longer tolerated in the Land of Enchantment."

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Sources:

June 2016, State of New Mexico Environment Department, *Compliance Order on Consent U.S. Department of Energy - Los Alamos National Laboratory (Modified September 2024)*

June 18, 2025 Letter from DOE to NMED, *Deferment of Corrective Action Activities for Solid Waste Management Unit 50-009 at Material Disposal Area C under the 2016 Compliance Order on Consent*

July 2, 2025 Letter from NMED to DOE, *Response, Deferment of Corrective Action Activities for Solid Waste Management Unit 50-009 at Material Disposal Area C*

July 9, 2025, LANL and NNSA to NMED, Response to June 9, 2025 Letter, Temporary Authorization Los Alamos National Laboratory Hazardous Waste Facility Permit

Department of Energy FY 2026 Congressional Budget Request, Laboratory Table

This press release is available online at https://nukewatch.org/lanl-expands-bomb-production-while-planning-tritium-releases-and-rejecting-cleanup/