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Los Alamos Lab: More Plutonium, More Nuclear Weapons

Santa Fe, NM – On Good Friday afternoon, just before the Easter weekend, the Department of Energy (DOE) posted its “Laboratory Tables”, the best source for site specific budget information. DOE boosts funding for the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) to \$4.6 billion in FY 2023 (+21%), which begins October 1. With another typical \$300 million in “Work for Others” (the Defense Department, FBI, CIA, etc.), LANL’s total institutional funding for FY 2023 will be approximately \$4.9 billion.

Out of that, \$3.6 billion is slated for core nuclear weapons research and production programs. The percentage of nuclear weapons funding at LANL has steadily grown as the Lab increasingly banks its future on plutonium “pit” bomb core production. A decade ago, nuclear weapons programs were 59% of LANL’s total institutional budget. Today it is 73%. Moreover, the remainder of Lab programs (including nonproliferation and cleanup) either directly or indirectly support nuclear weapons programs, for example through a 6% internal tax for “laboratory-directed research and development” that has historically tilted towards nuclear weapons.

LANL’s largest funding increase is for “Plutonium Modernization”, jumping 61% to \$1.6 billion in FY 2023. Within that, funding to expand the production of plutonium “pit” bomb cores at LANL’s aging plutonium pit production facility is increased 68% to \$588 million. DOE is also expecting that facility, known as “PF-4”, to soon begin processing up to 2.5 metric tons of excess plutonium each year for eventual disposal at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in southern New Mexico. All of this will result in increased transportation risks throughout the state and increased safety risks at PF-4, which has a chronic track record of nuclear safety incidences and worker contamination. At the same time, more than half of WIPP’s future capacity is being reserved for more radioactive plutonium wastes from future bomb production.

LANL claims to be on track to begin producing 30 plutonium pits by 2026, with a built-in surge capacity of 80 pits per year if needed. So-called “surge” production at LANL is becoming more likely because the cost of the redundant pit production facility at the Savannah River Site in South Carolina doubled to \$11 billion and is facing major delays.

Ironically, no future plutonium pit production is to maintain the safety and reliability of the existing nuclear weapons stockpile. Instead, future pits, heavily modified from tested designs, will be for speculative new-design nuclear weapons. This could degrade national security by eroding confidence in stockpile reliability because they can’t be tested given a global testing moratorium. Or, perhaps worse yet, prompt the U.S. back into testing, which would have severe international proliferation consequences.

The overall rationale for expanded pit production is to support nuclear weapons “deterrence.” Yet deterrence-only is explicitly rejected by the Pentagon in favor of nuclear warfighting capabilities. That is why the U.S. and Russia each have 1,000’s of nuclear weapons instead of just the few hundred needed for only deterrence. That is why the U.S. has a \$1.7 trillion nuclear weapons “modernization” program, in which the Pentagon has identified expanded plutonium pit production as the number one problem.

A current example is the proposed new-design W93 submarine-launched warhead. The need for the new W93 warhead is not clear given that the Navy’s main existing warhead, the W76, recently completed an expensive Life Extension Program that extended its service life by 30 years and enhanced its military capabilities. The main driver for the W93 is the United Kingdom which shares the W76 design and has lobbied the U.S. Congress for it. Despite the lack of clear need, funding for LANL’s work on the W93 is nearly tripled to \$79 million in FY 2023.

In contrast, already low funding for LANL’s oversight of nuclear weapons dismantlements is cut from \$2.8 million in FY 2022 to \$2 million in FY 2023, a mere .06% of the Lab’s nuclear weapons budget. Dismantlements would encourage nuclear weapons nonproliferation and save taxpayers money by eliminating long-term security costs. However, DOE facilities that could perform dismantlements are too busy producing new nuclear weapons.

Nonproliferation programs at LANL are meant to help prevent the global spread of nuclear weapons and develop verification technologies for future arms control treaties. But those programs are funded at just 13% of LANL’s nuclear weapons programs (\$477.5 million requested in FY 2023).

The Los Alamos Lab promotes itself as a world-class scientific institution. However, the FY 2023 funding request for non-nuclear weapons science is \$69 million, only 1.9% of its nuclear weapons budget.

FY 2023 funding for cleanup at LANL remains steady at \$286.3 million. DOE requested \$275 million in FY 2022, which was a 33% increase over FY 2021. But DOE implemented that increase only after the New Mexico Environment Department sued DOE to terminate an ineffective Consent Order governing cleanup at the Lab.

Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch New Mexico Director, commented, “Money talks. Instead of self-proclaimed world-class science, the Los Alamos Lab is increasingly becoming a production site for civilization-destroying nuclear weapons.”

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The Department of Energy FY 2023 “Laboratory Tables” is available at <https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/doe-fy-23-budget-lab-table.pdf> More detailed DOE FY 2023 budgets are still yet to come.

This press release is available online at <https://nukewatch.org/lanl-more-pu-more-weapons-pr-4-18-22/>