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Energy Dept. Nearly Triples Funding for Plutonium Pit Production Cuts Cleanup in Half But Refuses to Complete New Env. Impact Statement for Los Alamos Lab

Santa Fe, NM – Today the Department of Energy’s semi-autonomous nuclear weapons agency, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), announced that it will not complete a new site-wide environmental impact statement for the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). The last site-wide environmental impact statement was in 2008.

Since that time a catastrophic wildfire burned to the western boundary of the Lab (likely to occur more frequently with climate change); an exploding radioactive waste drum improperly prepared by LANL shut down the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant for three years, costing taxpayers ~\$3 billion to reopen; the full extent and depth of a hexavalent chromium plume contaminating the regional groundwater is still not fully determined; and LANL’s long track record of chronic nuclear safety incidences remain unresolved.

On top of this Trump’s proposed FY 2021 budget cuts funding for LANL cleanup by \$100 million (46%) to \$120 million, when the New Mexico Environment Department has said up to \$250 million per year is necessary. That massive cut is consistent with DOE’s long term plans to leave some 200,000 cubic yards of radioactive and toxic wastes permanently buried in unlined pits and trenches. At one waste dump, plutonium has already been detected 500 feet below ground, more than halfway to deep groundwater.

In contrast, Trump’s budget proposes to add another billion dollars above last year to LANL’s nuclear weapons programs, which caused the need for cleanup to begin with. This includes the near tripling of “Plutonium Modernization” to \$845 million, with a quarter billion dollars to upgrade the Lab’s plutonium facilities to produce 30 or more plutonium pit bomb cores per year, and another \$610 million to oversee the establishment of redundant production of 50 pits or more per year at NNSA’s Savannah River Site in South Carolina. Ironically, none of this expanded production is slated to maintain the safety and reliability of the existing nuclear weapons stockpile. Instead it is for speculative new-design nuclear weapons that can’t be tested because of the global testing moratorium, or alternatively could push the U.S. back into testing with grave international proliferation consequences.

As background, in June 2019 NNSA had previously determined in a draft “Supplement Analysis” that no nation-wide programmatic environmental impact statement was necessary for expanded pit production, despite the fact that the agency intends to quadruple the production rate to 80 or more pits per year and establish production at an entirely new site (i.e., the Savannah River Site). The final Supplement Analysis went on to affirm that erroneous decision despite much public comment opposing it.

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Now NNSA has preliminarily determined in another draft “Supplement Analysis” that it doesn't have to complete a site-wide environmental impact statement for expanded pit production at the Los Alamos Lab. It is entirely predictable that the final Supplement Analysis will affirm that wrong decision. As things stand now, NNSA will prepare only a previously announced environmental impact statement for pit production at the Savannah River Site. Otherwise, the agency claims that it has already met its legal requirements for public review and comment under the National Environmental Policy Act through an antiquated nation-wide 2008 Complex Transformation Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement and a 2008 LANL Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement.

Jay Coghlan, Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, commented, “NNSA’s shutting the public out while steamrolling exorbitantly expensive expanded plutonium pit production is part and parcel of the Trump Administration's assault on the U.S.’ bedrock environmental law, the National Environmental Policy Act. There is a clear need for a nation-wide programmatic environmental impact statement to justify or not expanded plutonium pit production, followed by a new site-wide environmental impact statement for Los Alamos. New Mexicans should put their congressional delegation, especially Senators Udall and Heinrich, on the hot seat to support just that.”

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The National Nuclear Security Administration’s draft Supplement Analysis is available at <https://www.energy.gov/nepa/downloads/doeeis-0380-sa-06-draft-supplement-analysis>

Please note that NNSA is accepting public comment on its draft Supplement Analysis, due April 24, 2020. Comments can be emailed to lanlsweissa@nnsa.doe.gov. Nuclear Watch NM will have sample comments at www.nukewatch.org by April 10, 2020.