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**DOE Repeatedly Asks Safety Board for Time Extensions,
Los Alamos Lab Asked for >150 Cleanup Milestone Extensions,
But During Pandemic NNSA Rejects NM Senators' Request for
Extension of Public Comment on Plutonium Bomb Core Production**

Santa Fe, NM – Lisa Gordon-Hagerty, head of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), has rejected a request by New Mexico Senators Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich to extend the public comment period on expanded plutonium “pit” bomb core production because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, even in normal times NNSA and its parent Department of Energy routinely ask other government agencies for major time extensions when it comes to cleanup and independent oversight.

The two Senators requested a 45 day comment period extension on behalf of more than 120 organizations and individuals. Before that, Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich were among 24 Senators who asked the Office of Management and Budget to extend all federal public comment periods during the coronavirus national emergency.

NNSA’s rejection of their request is an apparent double standard given DOE’s requests for time extensions to respond to nuclear safety recommendations by the independent Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board.¹ The Safety Board has long reported on chronic nuclear safety problems at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). DOE has sought to kill the messenger by restricting Safety Board access to NNSA nuclear weapons facilities.

Concerning cleanup, the Lab asked the New Mexico Environment Department for more than 150 time extensions for legally required cleanup milestones, which NMED granted. The lack of comprehensive cleanup has caused extensive groundwater contamination, which LANL use to claim was impossible but now threatens the regional aquifer.

In contrast, NNSA has told Senators Udall and Heinrich that the expansion of plutonium pit production at LANL is so vital to national security that the agency cannot wait another 45 days for public comment, even while northern New Mexico is impacted by the pandemic. Lab cleanup has stopped because of coronavirus, but expanded plutonium pit production must go on, which in turn will cause the need for more cleanup. Instead DOE plans to cut cleanup funding by nearly half while LANL’s nuclear weapons production programs are slated for a 33% increase (\$2.9 billion in FY 2021).

Concerning NNSA’s claims of national security, it’s important to note that no future pit production is scheduled to maintain the safety and reliability of the existing nuclear weapons stockpile. Instead, future production will be for heavily modified pits for speculative new-design nuclear weapons that can’t be tested because of the global testing

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moratorium, hence possibly lowering reliability. Alternatively, new modified pits could prompt the U.S. to resume nuclear weapons testing, with severe international proliferation consequences. Independent experts have found that existing plutonium pits last at least a century (the average pit age in the active stockpile is less than 40 years old). More than 15,000 pits are already stored at NNSA's Pantex Plant near Amarillo, TX.

NNSA plans to spend at least \$5.8 billion at LANL and \$4.6 billion at the Savannah River Site (SRS) in South Carolina over the next decade on construction or upgrades of plutonium pit production facilities. Pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), NNSA has released a draft environmental impact statement for pit production at SRS since it is a completely new mission there. But NNSA claims that it is complying with its legal obligations under NEPA for the Los Alamos Lab by relying upon a draft "Supplement Analysis" to an outdated 2008 site-wide environmental impact statement. It is that draft Supplement Analysis that is now up for public comment. NNSA has already "preliminarily" concluded that it will NOT prepare a new site-wide EIS.

In response to earlier requests, the NNSA had extended the comment period on LANL's Supplement Analysis a mere 15 days to May 8, 2020. But the agency claimed that "a two month extension of the comment period would have a severe adverse impact on the detailed planning and coordination of this effort" to expand plutonium pit production at LANL.² That is difficult to believe given NNSA's chronic track record of massive cost overruns and broken schedules.

For starters, the Department of Energy has been on the Government Accountability Office's "High Risk List" for project mismanagement for 27 consecutive years. Independent experts have found that most of NNSA's proposed major projects are canceled outright, but of the few who aren't "we could find no successful historical major project that both cost more than \$700 million and achieved CD-4 [the Critical Decision to begin operations] in less than 16 years."³ This is particularly relevant given that NNSA proposes to "repurpose" the MOX Fuel Fabrication Facility at SRS for pit production, after that canceled project wasted more than 7 billion taxpayer dollars. Similarly, a major new plutonium facility at LANL was cancelled in 2012 when its projected construction costs exploded ten-fold to \$6.5 billion.

Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch Director, commented, "The NNSA is essentially telling the public to get lost during this epidemic, we're ramming through more nuclear weapons. But all the nukes in the world won't protect us from coronavirus. Citizens should use this unfairly limited public comment opportunity to demand that their taxpayer dollars produce real national security. Masks, ventilators and universal coronavirus testing are needed, not more nukes!"

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Senators Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich extension request to NNSA is available at <https://nukewatch.org/senators-letter-to-nnsa-april22/>

NNSA Administrator Lisa Gordon-Hagerty's rejection letter to Sen. Tom Udall is available at <https://nukewatch.org/nnsa-to-udall-4-30-20/>

NNSA's March 2020 *Draft Supplement Analysis of the 2008 Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement for the Continued Operation of Los Alamos National Laboratory for Plutonium Operations* is available at <https://www.energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2020/03/f72/draft-supplement-analysis-eis-0380-sa-06-lanl-pit-production-2020-03.pdf>

The deadline for comments is Saturday May 8. Comments can be emailed to lanlsweissa@nnsa.doe.gov, Subject line LANL SWEIS SA comment.

Sample comments by NukeWatch NM are available at www.nukewatch.org

See NukeWatch NM plutonium pit production fact sheet at <https://nukewatch.org/plutonium-pit-production-fact-sheet/>

This press release is available online at <https://nukewatch.org/nnsa-denies-comment-extension-PR-5-5-20/>

¹ For DOE's latest request, see Secretary Dan Brouillette to DNFSB Chairman Bruce Hamilton, April 27, 2020, <https://nukewatch.org/doe-secretary-brouillette-request-for-extension-to-respond-to-recommendation-2020/>

² NNSA letter, April 6, 2020, <https://nukewatch.org/nnsa-to-nukewatch-15-day-extension/>

³ *Independent Assessment of the Two-Site Pit Production Decision: Executive Summary*, Institute for Independent Analysis, May 2019, <https://nukewatch.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/IDA-With-cover-page.pdf>