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Safety Board Says Designing for “Unknown” Missions Has Adverse Seismic Implications for Proposed Nuclear Facility at Los Alamos

Even while plans for new-design nuclear weapons, the so-called Reliable Replacement Warhead, are on budgetary rocks in Congress, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) is still continuing with its ‘build it and they will come’ approach for a new nuclear facility to support plutonium pit “trigger” production at Los Alamos. These plans call for a ‘hotel concept’ to hopefully attract new missions for the nuclear facility, but these plans are on seismically shaky ground.

In a May 30th report, amid many other safety and design-related issues, the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board called the design of the proposed Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Nuclear Facility (CMRR-NF) at Los Alamos National Laboratory a “hotel concept” because NNSA mandated that the laboratory areas of the nuclear facility have a flexible, open floor plan to accommodate as-yet unknown future missions. The Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (DNFSB) is an independent federal agency commissioned by Congress to provide safety oversight of the nuclear weapons complex.

According to DNFSB:

This ‘hotel concept’ prevents the addition of shear walls through the laboratory wings and has resulted in major seismic design challenges. Project personnel had been using a preliminary estimate of seismic motions for the facility until Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) completed its update of the probabilistic seismic hazards analysis; however, they did not anticipate that the final seismic motions, particularly vertical motions, would be in resonance with various sections of the nuclear facility... The ‘hotel concept’ has generated seismic amplifications in the CMRR facility; it is not clear whether the facility and equipment can be designed to accommodate such demands.

In partial response, CMRR’s concrete floor is now designed to be 10 feet in thickness the basement walls 4 feet. Still, the Board says its “staff does not yet have a clear understanding of the structural behavior of the nuclear facility...” Seismic concerns escalated construction costs at Hanford’s waste vitrification plant from an originally estimated \$4.4 billion in 2002 to \$12.2 billion in 2008. CMRR’s construction costs were originally estimated at \$600 million in FY 2004, but a recent Senate Armed Services Committee report states that it will now cost \$2.6 billion. The current but obsolete estimate for just design is \$225 million and climbing, and final design has not even begun!

On May 12th, the Senate Armed Services Committee cut NNSA’s fiscal year 2009 CMRR budget request in half because of design uncertainty, which the Committee stated “has significant unresolved issues for which there is no clear resolution.”

Nuclear Watch New Mexico argues that all funding for the CMRR-Nuclear Facility should be deleted until the incoming president completes a new Nuclear Posture Review, as already required by Congress. That review will set the future course of the nuclear weapons complex. CMRR is key to NNSA’s proposal to expand plutonium pit production at LANL. Yet, a recent GAO report commissioned by Congress found very little need for any pit production at all.

“Why spend money on an possibly unneeded facility in a seismically vulnerable location to accommodate as-yet unknown future missions?” asked Nuclear Watch’s Scott Kovac. “Instead, we should be investing in nonproliferation, energy independence and cleanup programs at the Lab.”

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The DNFSB report can be found at http://www.dnfsb.gov/pub_docs/lanl/sir_20080530_la.pdf

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