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Contact: Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch New Mexico, 505.989.7342 jay@nukewatch.org

Domenici's Appropriations Committee "Skeptical" Plutonium Pit Production Could Be Anywhere But Los Alamos; Orders Study of "Expanded Mission" at Key New Lab Facility

Santa Fe, NM – The Senate Subcommittee for Energy and Water Development Appropriations, chaired by New Mexico's Pete Domenici, has recently fully funded the construction of a new plutonium facility at Los Alamos called the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Project (CMRR). It will ultimately cost up to one billion dollars. Domenici's Subcommittee is "skeptical" that other new plutonium storage and manufacturing facilities can be built anywhere else in the foreseeable future. As an example, the Subcommittee reminded the Department of Energy "that it has been unable to secure funding in the current year to support planning for a Modern Pit Facility. As such, the Committee directs the Department to consider alternatives to making changes to the CMRR facility to accommodate an expanded mission scope." The Subcommittee required completion of a report on that subject by June 1, 2007.

In past years Congress rejected the "Modern Pit Facility", a proposed new super bomb factory for resumed industrial-scale plutonium pit production (pits are the atomic "triggers" for modern thermonuclear weapons). In response, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), the semi-autonomous nuclear weapons agency within the Department of Energy, is now planning to increase "interim" production at Los Alamos from 10 pits per year to up to 80. The CMRR will be physically linked to LANL's existing plutonium pit production facility and in direct support of its expanding mission. Meanwhile, NNSA continues to claim that production of at least 125 pits per year is eventually needed to re-establish the "level of capability comparable to what we had during the Cold War."

NNSA has been under pressure by the U.S. House of Representatives to meet post-9.11 security concerns and lower costs by building and operating a future "Consolidated Plutonium Production Center" at a site yet to be determined. Under that plan, all large quantities of nuclear weapons special nuclear materials are to be relocated from the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) to that consolidated center by 2022. The House Subcommittee for Energy and Water Development Appropriations, the direct counterpart to Domenici's Senate Subcommittee, cut Fiscal Year 2007 funding for CMRR construction from \$112,422,000 to \$12,422,000.

551 West Cordova Road #808 Santa Fe, New Mexico 87505
505.989.7342 Fax 505.989.7352
info@nukewatch.org www.nukewatch.org

Because CMRR construction will not be finished until 2014, the House Subcommittee noted “CMRR will serve its primary production support function for only eight years before it is made obsolete by the new [consolidated] plutonium facility... The Committee finds this type of planning by the NNSA simply irrational... The Committee directs the Department [of Energy] to terminate the CMRR project and instead co-locate future production capacity and the radiological chemistry materials research work” that the new facility will do. The Subcommittee further noted “A billion dollar investment in the CMRR at Los Alamos only makes sense if the NNSA is prepared to site the Consolidated Nuclear Production Center, or at a minimum the Consolidated Plutonium Production Center, at the same location.” Domenici’s full funding of the CMRR now points to a logical conclusion that LANL will indeed be the country’s permanent site of plutonium pit production.

Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch New Mexico observed, “When the House came out with its cut to a billion dollar plutonium facility at Los Alamos, we called on Senator Domenici to either drop his support for the project or acknowledge that Los Alamos is destined to become this country’s super plutonium pit production center. He has now more than answered us by not only fully funding the project but also calling upon the facility to expand its mission. This is one more downhill step in the descent of a once proud scientific institution into increasingly becoming a production site for nuclear weapons, the real weapons of mass destruction.”

In related developments, Domenici’s Subcommittee more than doubled funding for new nuclear weapons designs under the so-called Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) Program. The Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories have already submitted competitive first designs to NNSA, which will select the final design for production by the end of this year. However, Domenici’s Subcommittee has called for the “immediate expansion” of the RRW Program, and specifically earmarked funding for a second new design. Los Alamos is already scheduled to produce a prototype plutonium pit for the first RRW design by 2009 and begin full-scale production by 2012. Domenici’s Subcommittee directs LANL to begin full-scale pit production of the second RRW design by 2014.

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