nuclear watch new mexico

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House Appropriations Axes "Irrational" Plutonium Lab at Los Alamos
Watchdogs Call on Domenici to Drop Radioactive Pork

Santa Fe, NM – In a stunning move, the congressional House Subcommittee for Energy and Water Development Appropriations cut Fiscal Year 2007 construction funding for the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Project at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). The cut is from the requested $112,422,000 to $12,422,000. The old Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Building, built in the middle 1950s, is highly contaminated and is being abandoned for nuclear weapons-grade plutonium work because of prohibitive costs to seismically upgrade it. The new CMRR project, essentially an advanced plutonium lab, would be physically linked to LANL's facility for production of plutonium pits (or nuclear weapons "triggers"), and in direct support of that expanding mission.

However, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) has recently bowed to congressional pressures to meet post-9.11 security concerns and lower costs by agreeing to build and operate a future "Consolidated Plutonium Production Center" at a site yet to be determined. All large quantities of weapons-grade special nuclear materials are to be relocated from LANL to that consolidated center by 2022.

Construction of the CMRR, estimated to cost up to $1 billion, is not scheduled to be finished until 2014. As the House Subcommittee put it, "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. It appears designed to maximize future budgets and the number of new facilities required… 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."

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." This distinctly raises the possibility that long-term plutonium pit production could remain and be expanded at LANL. The NNSA is currently planning to increase "interim" pit production at Los Alamos from 10 pits per year to up to 50, and asserts that 125 pits per year are needed to re-establish the "level of capability comparable to what we had during the Cold War" that it wants.

Senator Pete Domenici, long an ardent proponent for funding to New Mexico's labs, chairs the Senate Subcommittee for Energy and Water Development Appropriations. Before final funding levels are established, House appropriations need to be reconciled with Senate appropriations. Given the House's cut to CMRR construction, Senate restoration of its funding under Domenici's leadership could be a crucial test toward determining LANL's future as the nation's Consolidated Plutonium Production Center. The U.S. has not had that type of industrial-scale nuclear bomb production since the notorious Rocky Flats Plant was shut down in 1989 following a FBI raid investigating environmental crimes.

Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch New Mexico observed, “Senator Domenici can’t have it both ways now. He needs to either drop his support for the CMRR project, or acknowledge that Los Alamos is destined to become this country’s super plutonium pit production center. This will be a test of whether his loyalties are really to New Mexicans, or whether it is to the expanding nuclear weapons industry in this State. He will clarify his position by whether he funds a new, expensive plutonium lab at Los Alamos, or not.”

Related CMRR facts:

- LANL will be under new management on June 1, with the Bechtel Corporation as the major partner to the incumbent University of California. Bechtel is building a high-level radioactive waste treatment plant at Hanford that has shot up in costs from approximately $4.5 billion to $11 billion or over. The House Subcommittee noted that project “has a long and sordid history that indicates both the magnitude of the task before the Department, as well as the Department’s historic combination of overly optimistic cost estimates coupled with consistent project mismanagement.”
- Should CMRR construction proceed it will be performed on a “design-build” or “fast track” basis. That same method has been identified as one of the major contributing factors to the soaring costs of the Hanford waste treatment plant.
- Between 1980 and 1996, the Government Accountability Office reported that 31 of 80 DOE projects over $100 million had been terminated prior to completion, 34 were continuing although over budget, and only 15 reached full completion. In all, should it proceed, significant cost overruns with the CMRR Project are likely.
- The major rationale for the CMRR Project was that seismic upgrades to the old Chemistry and Metallurgy Research were cost prohibitive. However, the new CMRR is to be built between two fault zones and some 20 feet above a layer of fragile volcanic ash. Lab geologic maps indicate that the nearest fault is only some 2,000 feet from the proposed CMRR location.

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The House Subcommittee for Energy and Water Development Appropriations’ report is available upon request.