newsletter of **nuclear watch new mexico** volume 8, issue 2 **summer '07**

WATCHDOG

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Can This Leopard Change its Spots?

LANL Should Begin Diversifying Its Mission Now!

Nuclear Watch New Mexico has vigorously opposed nuclear weapons programs at Los Alamos National Laboratory for years, but **for the first time we think there is a possibility that Lab missions could change.** Currently, 70% of LANL's budget is for research, testing and production of nuclear weapons. But as next year's federal budget has taken shape, the call for basic transformation of the Lab and how it does business has become a hot topic.

The old agenda of never-ending nuclear weapons development and production looks overpriced and misguided, even hypocritical, in today's world. Also, the seemingly endless string of security lapses at the Lab has not gone unnoticed by Congress. **The U.S. House of Representatives** Appropriations Committee **cut nearly $400 million** from the Department of Energy's nuclear weapons budget for fiscal year 2008 compared to this year, but added approximately $800 million for nonproliferation and energy efficiency programs that LANL can compete for. **However, the Senate** Appropriations Committee **restored most of the weapons funding** the House moved to cut (see next article). The final House-Senate compromise will be hammered out in a negotiating conference sometime after the congressional August recess. The Lab's future may well hinge on its results, but there is time yet to pressure Congress to do the right thing! (Please see "What to Do" on back page.)

In keeping with the lamentable tradition of far-reaching national policy decisions being determined by local pork, Sen. Pete Domenici and U.S. Rep. Heather Wilson have reacted to possible budget cuts by sounding the alarm over feared job losses and claimed threats to national security. The House cuts were overwhelmingly directed against provocative new nuclear weapons under the so-called Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) program, and against projects that would speed up Los Alamos becoming the nation's permanent plutonium pit production center.

Wilson has even gone so far as to publicly say that "the decisions embedded in this (House Appropriations) legislation will lead us either to return to nuclear testing, or to abandon nuclear deterrence because we will stop maintaining the stockpile." This is an outrageous and unsupported statement. We now know that our existing nuclear weapons, tested in Nevada many times, are far more reliable than previously believed, due to a November 2006 conclusion by high-level independent experts that the crucial plutonium pit "triggers" have reliable lifetimes of a century or more. What does this mean? We don't need new-design nuclear weapons and expanded pit production at Los Alamos to maintain a reliable stockpile.

Global impact

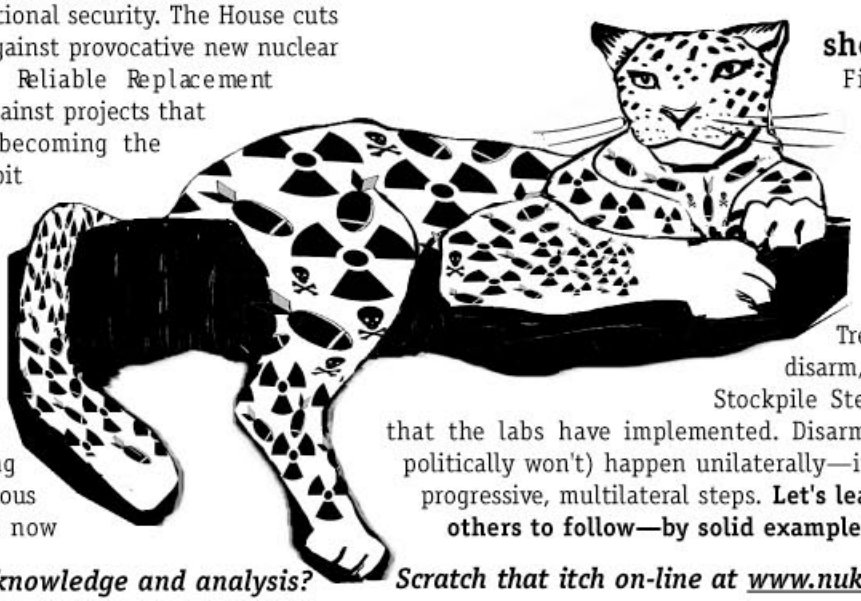
The truth is that new untested nuclear weapons could prompt renewed testing, which would have very negative impacts on global nonproliferation. Moreover, DOE explicitly plans to pay for Reliable Replacement Warheads by progressively cutting and ending "Life Extension Programs" for existing (reliable) nuclear weapons that could bolster the illusory "need" for new weapons and the subsequent need to test them.

But if new weapons and expanded pit production are the wrong future directions for LANL, what are the right ones? To begin to answer, we make three critical assumptions:

1. Politically, LANL will not miraculously go away.

2. It will remain a national security Lab.

3. This nation does face grave national security threats, and LANL should help meet them. We need a new national security strategy for today's world, not more nuclear warheads for a world gone by. Nukes will not help us win the "war on terror." Indeed, if we don't lead in eradicating nuclear weapons globally, they could devastate us.



What LANL should be doing

First, we do need genuine curatorship of nuclear weapons while we progress toward the 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty's mandate to disarm, not the regressive Stockpile Stewardship Program that the labs have implemented. Disarmament can't (and politically won't) happen unilaterally—it must be built on progressive, multilateral steps. **Let's lead—and persuade others to follow—by solid example.**

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Unquenchable thirst for knowledge and analysis? *Scratch that itch on-line at www.nukewatch.org*

The Leopard's Spots continued from p.1

Nonproliferation efforts should be the lab's top priority. A future test ban treaty will require sophisticated **verification techniques.** Another need is **remote detection of nuclear weapons and materials.** There is critical intelligence work to be done, such as **nuclear materials accounting and tracking.** The ultimate goal of nuclear disarmament can't be achieved without rigorous verification measures, for which LANL can help provide the technical basis. There should also be increased **technical support for warhead dismantlements.**

Another practical national security concern: our weak **maritime port security,** which should have been prioritized over a misbegotten foreign war. A scenario we can all dread is one in which a nuclear weapon is smuggled onto our shores in a sea container, when only one in 20 is checked. This is one disaster which lab-developed detection technology must help prevent, and it is a challenging one to do without dramatically slowing down international commerce. The present status of port security, nearly six years after 9-11, is disgraceful. Additionally, should a calamity of this type ever occur, nuclear forensics will be vital, as well as cleanup expertise.

Global **pandemic modeling,** technical support and modeling for **protecting national infrastructure** from both potential terrorist events and natural calamities are needed—think of what we have witnessed with the Asian tsunami and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Cleanup funds for Los Alamos should be tripled and designed to favor regional companies as a matter of economic development. Effective **cleanup technologies** must be developed for application across America's nuclear weapons complex, which so far LANL has failed to do. DOE's environmental problems at every nuclear weapons facility are well known. Across the nation, cleanup agreements and deadlines are imperiled by funding and technical shortfalls and lack of political will. **Cleanup must now be one of the nuclear weapons complex's top priorities.** Why couldn't LANL play a key role in this national challenge?

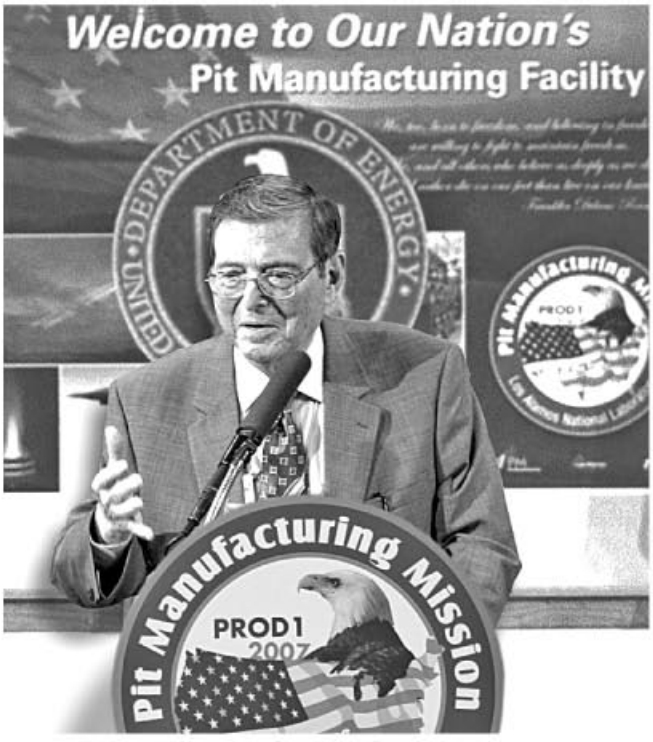
Basic physics research, which has shrunk as the lab's nuclear weapons programs have grown, should be revitalized.

The Lab's advanced supercomputers (now primarily used for nuclear weapons simulations) could support global **climate change modeling** without sucking all the money away from other long-established entities in this field. The same is true for **renewable energy research and development**; LANL should support but not lead. (DOE has an existing renewable lab in Colorado.) But LANL could reconstitute its mothballed **geothermal** site as a clean renewable resource that could economically benefit the region. There's also vital **energy efficiency work** that the Lab can do in helping us move toward energy independence. Conservation is the first and best step!

Finally, in order to enable all of the above, the Lab must sharply **prune bloated management and dramatically reduce its exorbitant cost of doing business.** In part, those costs can be reduced by radically shrinking nuclear weapons development and production programs, which are counterproductive, enormously expensive and have shielded the Lab from having to learn how to compete for federal dollars.

LANL Should Truly Benefit New Mexico *and* the Nation!

No one can possibly have all the answers for what LANL should do. But some things are certain. The Lab is increasingly being called upon to diversify (for example, by our Rep. Tom Udall), crucial national security issues must be addressed in realistic ways, and LANL should be of greater benefit to New Mexicans and real national security. **New nuclear weapons and expanded plutonium pit production do not meet those needs.** If the Lab can break out of its nuclear weapons obsession, it could contribute in powerful ways to addressing the real security threats of the 21st century.



Plutonium Pit Pete
celebrating the birth of two new pits on July 2

So...Who Stands in the Way of Mission Change at Los Alamos?

The U.S. needs new national nuclear weapons policies that emphasize nonproliferation through solid leadership by example. To craft new policies, **we must dramatically turn away from the Bush Administration's 2002 "Nuclear Posture Review"** that called for new earth-penetrating and lower-yield (and hence more "usable") nuclear weapons. The good news is that the Senate and House have already both required a new post-Bush Nuclear Posture Review, a mandate likely to survive conference.

But **the other very serious obstacle is Senator Pete Domenici and his groomed successor-to-be, Rep. Heather Wilson.** Pete and Heather spent their first Monday in July "celebrating" LANL's production of two plutonium "trigger" pits. These are the first to be "certified" for deployment to the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile since an FBI raid investigating environmental crimes shut down pit production at the Rocky Flats Plant in 1989. These two new pits mean that the U.S. is resuming nuclear weapons production for the first time in 18 years, even as we have 6,000 deployed nuclear weapons and 14,000 plutonium pits held in reserve at the Pantex Plant near Amarillo, Texas.

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At that "ceremony" for the birth of more weapons of mass destruction, Pete admitted that the only thing preventing LANL from becoming the nation's permanent pit production center was the lack of a new facility. The truth is that the new facility is not hypothetical; it's a $1.5 billion-plus plutonium facility called the "Chemical and Metallurgical Research Replacement Project" (CMRR), now already under construction. House Appropriations cut all of its funding, saying that it didn't want to prejudice ongoing debate on what the future nuclear weapons complex should be. Previously, the House has said that funding CMRR makes sense only if LANL were to become the nation's permanent pit production site. But Domenici has not only fought for full CMRR funding in the Senate, but is also advocating full funding for pit production at LANL, which the House cut nearly in half. Further, Domenici is fighting to fund new designs under the Reliable Replacement Warhead Program with 66 million dollars, while the House refused to fund them at all.

The overall effect is that Domenici is blocking serious alternative missions at LANL by placing his bets on future funding for Los Alamos via plutonium pit production and expanding nuclear weapons work. This presents New Mexicans with a stark choice: will LANL have new national security missions that could benefit the state and the nation, or will it become Rocky Flats II? Domenici has already decided for you, but what's your decision?

Well, I think we might be just ...playing with words...The only thing that would keep them (LANL) from being the permanent pit manufacturing center would be if we don't get the physical facilities.

--Senator Pete Domenici
The New Mexican, July 2, 2007
http://www.freenewmexican.com/news/64190.html#

What he *didn't* mention: the primary facility is already under construction, and he is fighting to keep it funded.

How New Mexican congressional members voted: Rep. Tom Udall voted for the House bill cutting nuclear weapons programs, saying that he hoped that it sent a strong message to LANL that it must diversify. Reps. Heather Wilson and Steve Pearce voted against it. The full Senate will not vote on its appropriations bill until September, but Domenici's position is already on public record. At this point Senator Bingaman's position is less clear. However, in a different bill he introduced a useful amendment requiring that the projected costs and schedules of new-design replacements for nuclear weapons become publicly known.

LANL's new pits were originally scheduled for 2001; by then, the Lab's production costs totaled $513 million over four years. Now--five years later--it has cost at least $2.3 billion, money that would have been much better spent on true national security priorities, such as nonproliferation programs, port security and energy independence.

For more, see "LANL's First Certified Plutonium Pits: Unnecessary, Provocative, Behind Schedule and Over Budget" at http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/PitCosts.pdf

But why build new pits at all? Up to 350 existing pits a year can be re-used. http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/PitReuse.pdf

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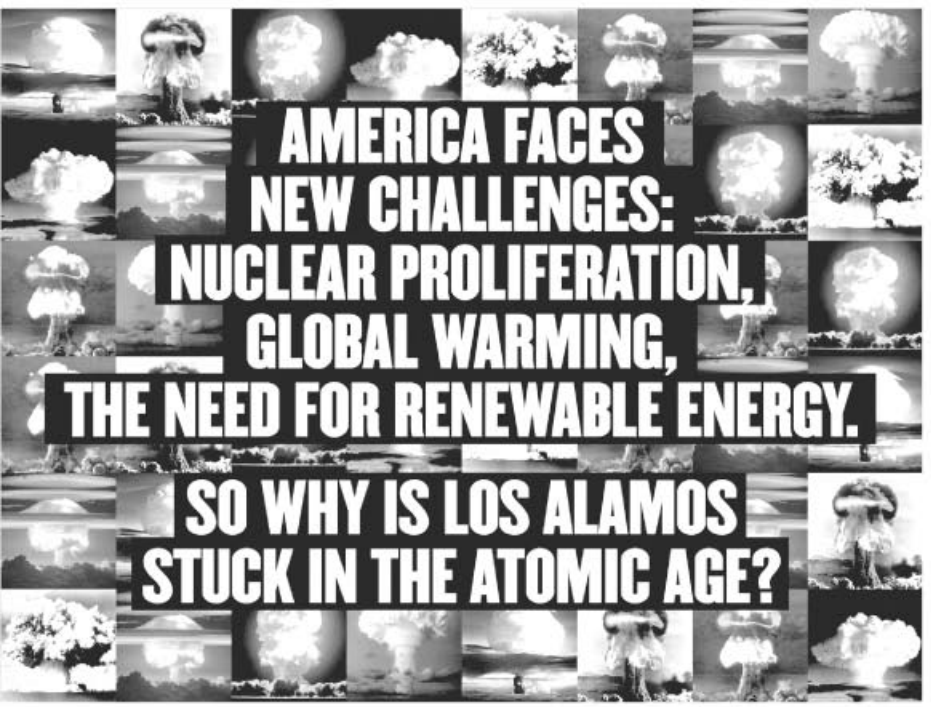
We collaborated with the national organization Physicians for Social Responsibility on this half-page ad which ran in the July 2 *New Mexican* to offer a less enthusiastic view of the new pits, which cost taxpayers over $2 billion and are a step backwards for LANL and the world. We held a press conference later that day to "counter-celebrate."



Today Los Alamos National Laboratory is throwing a party. Some of the most brilliant scientific minds in our nation are celebrating the first production in 18 years of a plutonium "pit"- the explosive core of a nuclear weapon – certified for use in an already excessive U. S. nuclear arsenal.

Seventy percent of Los Alamos' budget is directly focused on nuclear weapons today – and much of the rest supports nuclear programs.

Nuclear weapons are a dead end. Los Alamos' future depends on putting its scientific excellence to work in the service of urgent new national and global challenges. That is a mission America could truly celebrate.

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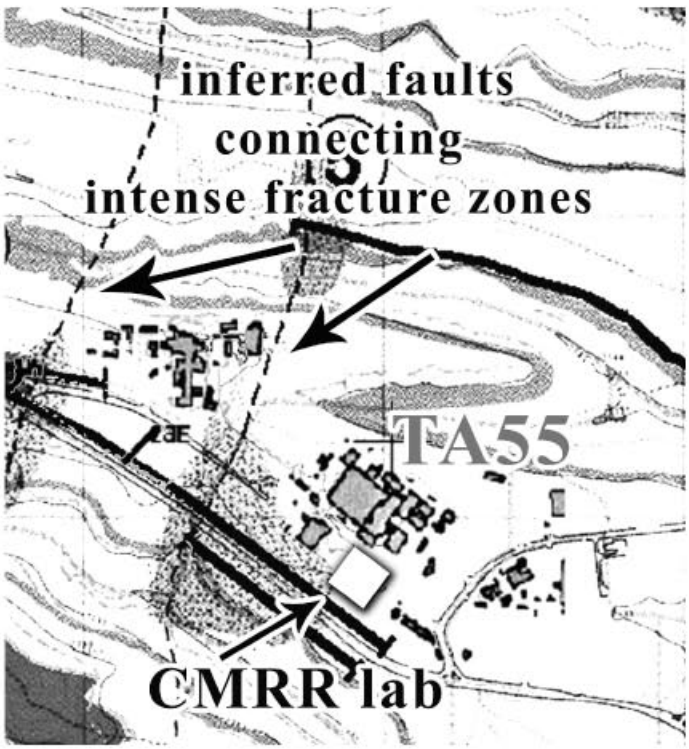
LANL on Shaky Ground in More Ways Than One:
Finding Fault(s) at Los Alamos

What are LANL's faults?

Too many to enumerate here, but we'll stick to the seismic variety. The recent extensive damage done at the world's largest nuclear power plant in Japan is now threatening the entire future of that country's nuclear industry. But what is the seismic situation at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, which after all sits near an enormous and potentially active volcanic crater? In short, the ground under Los Alamos is laced with fault zones, and projections of seismic risks are increasing. An updated "Probabilistic Seismic Hazards Analysis" (PSHA), due anytime, is expected to conclude that projected seismic hazards will increase roughly 50% across the Lab. Besides the fact that LANL will have to perform facility-specific structural analyses to identify new vulnerabilities to every existing structure, impacts to new design and construction projects must now also be determined.



The greatest predicted risks LANL poses to offsite populations come mostly from fires caused by earthquakes. A draft Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement (SWEIS), released last summer and legally required to sanction ongoing operations, did not analyze the impacts of this 50% increase in potential seismic hazards, even though the Lab already had preliminary information about the increase. Because the public was not able to comment on this increase, as is its legal right, the SWEIS should be re-released for public comment and the new seismic study released for public review.

A new advanced plutonium facility called the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement (CMRR) Project is now being built at Technical Area-55, and will directly support expanding plutonium pit production at LANL. DOE regulations prohibit siting nuclear facilities directly over seismic faults. Earlier studies showed the presence of a fault under TA-55. However, it disappeared in later geologic maps and resurfaced 2,000 feet west of the planned CMRR location, with a second fault about the same distance to the east. Recently, the seismic study specifically done for CMRR states that the fault in question does not underlie TA-55 at all, but rather splays to the southwest into a wide fault zone approximately 3000 ft away, with no second fault to the east. Can the soon-to-be released study explain why earthquake risks are increasing across the Lab, but are somehow decreasing at the new $1.5 billion plutonium facility?

In the late 1990's, a seismic fault was discovered under the old CMR Building in TA-3. As a result, ongoing seismic upgrades were judged to be cost-prohibitive, precipitating the decision to ultimately abandon that facility and build the new CMRR. Current construction technologies may be able to partially guard against higher projected seismic hazards, but at great cost (for example, a facility now being built at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington State to encase high-level radioactive wastes in glass has jumped in construction costs from $4.5 to $13 billion). The recent earthquake in Japan demonstrates that there is simply no fool-proof safety standard for nuclear facilities located in active earthquake zones. It is debatable as to when the faults under Los Alamos could become seriously active again, but replacing one major plutonium facility due to seismic concerns with another that has similar concerns displays shaky logic. At a minimum, the extent of potential seismic hazards that could impact dangerous nuclear operations should be publicly known and comprehensively analyzed in the ongoing environmental review of continuing operations at the Lab.

--Scott Kovac

DawgBites
quick news items

Well, fine...
DOE has slapped the Los Alamos management partnership with a record-breaking $3.3 million fine for violations that created "vulnerabilities" of national security interests, such as when documents on nuclear weapons designs and testing were discovered during an offsite meth bust. The University of California, sole manager of the Lab from 1943 to 2006, was levied $3 million of the total fine and is desperately trying to squirm out of it, even arguing that an entity of the California state government can't be fined by the federal government.

National Security is so hard to grasp
Members of the board of directors for Los Alamos National Security, LLC, the new Lab managers (including Bechtel, Inc.) were themselves involved in a security breach in January of 2007. Allegedly LANS officials shared classified information about nuclear weapons materials from a laptop over an unsecured network. This event was categorized as IMI-1, a most serious threat to national security interests. Rep. Tom Udall stated, "...for the sake of the Lab's future, those who are responsible must be held accountable." Reportedly the laptop and hardware involved in the incident were "sanitized" by a team from the Lawrence Livermore Lab, LANL's longtime competitors.

When the day is done and you want to run
A radiation control technician that works in America's recently celebrated Plutonium Pit Manufacturing Facility, TA-55 at LANL, was arrested when investigators found six rifles, more than 30 grams of packaged cocaine, scales, security and radiation badges at his home. Because of the man's security status, the FBI participated in the investigation and members of Congress were briefed about the case. Sheriff Darren White of Bernalillo County is quoted as saying, "By day this guy was entrusted with protecting our nation's most guarded secrets. By night he was peddling dope. Not good." Duh!

Rolling to the river
State investigators have found plutonium levels in the Rio Grande 170 times higher than normal. Plutonium in storm water runoff that flows from Los Alamos to the river was measured at 16 times the safe drinking water standard. NM Environmental Secretary Ron Curry declared in a news release, "Something must be done now to protect New Mexicans and the environment from continued discharges of harmful contaminants to the Rio Grande."

Creeping threat of chrome
LANL is drilling two new monitoring wells as sentinels to detect if a plume of hexavalent chromium (yes, the contaminant in the movie "Erin Brockovich") in the regional aquifer is approaching a well 500 feet away that provides drinking water for Los Alamos County. In wells a mile away the chromium is up to four times the federal drinking water standard. As much as 230,000 pounds of the material was released from the Lab's power plant between 1956 and 1972. Prolonged exposure has been linked to cancer and can cause liver and kidney damage. Our pals over at Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety have English and Spanish fact sheets on the contaminants and what's wrong with the $150 million wells that were supposed to monitor this stuff. Check it out at *www.nuclearactive.com*.

Blowin' in the wind
Information in previously undisclosed notes by an industrial hygienist indicate that in the late '40's and early '50's as much as 100 times more plutonium was released from Los Alamos smokestacks than was officially reported by the Lab. When asked if there was an explanation for this discrepancy James Rickman, a LANL spokesperson, responded that the releases happened "under prior management." Guess it's not a problem then.

Hot dust from the Cold War
Our colleagues at the Government Accountability Project conducted a study last fall and found potentially harmful levels of radioactive plutonium and strontium in residential dust collected near the Picuris and San Ildefonso Pueblos.

Nuclear bunker busting
In February, activists rejoiced when the Department of Defense (DoD) canceled its "Divine Strake" nuclear weapons effects test in Nevada. The very next month, DoD quietly announced it would be conducting that test, in fact a series of tests, at White Sands in New Mexico.
For more information see *http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/500ton_WSMR.pdf*

--John Witham

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mission statement

The mission of Nuclear Watch New Mexico is to provide timely and accurate information to the public on nuclear issues in the American Southwest, and to encourage effective citizen involvement and activism in these issues. We seek to promote greater environmental protection, safe disposition of radioactive wastes, and federal policy changes that will curb the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

In This Issue: Los Alamos Faces Mission Change--What Should They Really Do Up There?; Finding LANL's Many Faults (Seismic,That Is); Divine Strake Moves to New Mexico; Plutonium Pit Pete (Domenici)--Stuck in the Old Ways; and Other Hot News Items

What to do

You said it!

Thank you for telling off the Department of Energy about reprocessing spent nuclear fuel rods. DOE received over 35,000 comments on the "Global Nuclear Energy Partnership" (GNEP), Bush's plan for nuke plants around the world.

Help stop Los Alamos from becoming the nation's permanent pit production plant! Write or call your elected officials. Tell them to cut funding for the CMRR facility and pit production. While you're at it, tell them to cut RRW funding.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman: 202.224.5521, 505.988.6647
Sen. Pete Domenici: 202.224.6621, 505.988.6511
Rep. Heather Wilson (1st District): 202.225.6316, 505.346.6781
Rep. Steve Pearce (2nd District): 202.225.2365
Rep. Tom Udall (3rd District): 202.225.6190, 505.984.8950

Voice your concerns about DOE's proposal to bury *more* nuclear waste at Los Alamos! DOE is evaluating disposal options for Greater Than Class C (GTCC) "low-level" radioactive waste from decommissioned nuclear power plants. Public comments are due on September 21, 2007. DOE will hold a public meeting on August 14 in Los Alamos. Get more information on Greater than Class C waste at http://www.gtcceis.anl.gov.

Heads up! LANL is due to release the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for its Bio-Safety Level-3 lab this August. Due in October are draft EISs for GNEP and Complex 2030, the future nuclear weapons complex DOE wants.

Donate now! We run a lean, mean NukeWatch machine. But to stay mean, we can't be *too* lean. Your support is vital to us! Thanks!