



# WATCHDOG

news that bites back

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## ***Taxpayer Alert -- Energy Department Budget for '06: CLEANUP SLASHED, CONTROVERSIAL WEAPONS PROGRAMS BACK!***

In February the Department of Energy (DOE) released its budget request for Fiscal Year (FY) 2006. Nationally, **environmental cleanup** of the widely contaminated nuclear weapons complex will be **cut by 12.5%**. Core **nuclear weapons** research, testing and production programs for the DOE's semi-autonomous National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) is to **rise to \$6.63 billion**, with **\$34.67 billion projected over the next five years**. These annual levels are **50% higher than the Cold War average**. Requested funding for "Directed Stockpile Work", the hands-on work of **refurbishing, modernizing and indefinitely preserving nuclear weapons**, would **increase by 11.3%**. Although higher, funding for nonproliferation efforts to globally control weapons-usable materials is still only a fourth of that for core nuclear weapons programs.

Further, the NNSA wants funding for four controversial nuclear weapons programs that Congress either completely cut, substantially reduced or redirected in FY 2005:

- The **Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP)** is a nuclear "bunker-buster" intended to destroy hardened, deeply buried targets. Citing the disconnect between developing a militarily new nuclear weapon and asking other countries to forswear their own WMDs, Congress rejected any funding whatsoever for RNEP in FY 2005. Now the NNSA is requesting \$4 million for design and feasibility studies. In an obviously coordinated effort to help possibly mute congressional objections, the US Air Force is simultaneously requesting \$4.5 million for air-drop tests.

- The **Reliable Replacement Warhead** is an effort to eventually produce simpler nuclear weapons designs to replace today's overly sophisticated models. Last year, Congress rejected the NNSA's \$9 million funding request for an "Advanced Concepts Initiative" for so-called mini-nukes and possible exotic new designs. Congress reprogrammed the request to the Reliable Replacement Warhead initiative, for which the NNSA now plans to spend \$97 million over the next 5 years.

- The **Modern Pit Facility (MPF)** is a proposed industrial-scale bomb plant that would produce plutonium pits of both existing and future new designs. Congress rejected the NNSA's FY 2005 request of \$29.8 million, appropriating only \$7 million. Two of the five candidate MPF sites are located in New Mexico at Los Alamos and Carlsbad. Now the NNSA is requesting \$7.69 million for FY 2006, and projects spending \$125.76 million over the next five years.

- **Enhanced Test Readiness** is an effort by the NNSA to reduce the lead time necessary to return to full-scale nuclear weapons testing from

24 months to 18 months. The NNSA wants \$25 million for FY06 with \$121.64 million projected over the next five years. Congress funded only half of NNSA's \$30 million FY 2005 request.

**What's wrong with these weapons initiatives?** With respect to the nuclear bunker-buster, the original claims were that the RNEP would somehow be a clean, surgical-strike nuclear weapon. This has been debunked by the limits imposed by physics on penetrating hard rock or concrete, meaning that massive collateral damage would still occur and incalculable tons of ejected soil and debris would become radioactive fallout. Again, it would be a terrible international example if the U.S. produced a militarily new nuclear weapon while pressuring other nations to forswear their own WMDs.

Concerning simpler nuclear weapons designs with more "robust" shelf lives that could last through the 21st century, this too sends the blatant message that while preaching to others the U.S. never intends to eradicate its own WMDs.

As to the last two initiatives, what can be said that is not obvious? Clearly, plans to return to massive nuclear weapons production and full-scale testing send the entirely wrong message to a world awash with WMD threats. New Mexicans should take special note that while the DOE proposes to spend a total of \$4.1 billion in our state in FY 2006, a full 67% will be for core nuclear weapons programs. In contrast, only 9% will be for cleanup and 1% for renewable energy technologies. In fact, more than **40% of DOE's national nuclear weapons programs budget will be spent in New Mexico alone**. Therefore, New Mexicans have a special responsibility to pressure for responsible national and international nuclear weapons policies, and should be strongly active toward that end. Let's get off our butts and do just that by encouraging Congress to again cut controversial nuclear weapons programs!

--Jay Coghlan



cartoon by Jamie Chase

## News from the "Duh!" Department:

# LANL Admits that Our Aquifer Recharges Under the Lab! Who Knew? The Lab May Be Dangerously Polluting New Mexico Groundwater!

In public groundwater meetings over the course of the last year, Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) finally admitted that **our regional aquifer captures some of its water from under the Lab**. As late as 1997, LANL officially stated that our regional aquifer under Lab property was protected from contaminants by "impermeable geologic formations." But ever so belatedly, the Lab has concluded that the geological formations under LANL are not so impervious. Non-LANL hydrologists as far back as 1963 had reached this same conclusion. LANL hydrologists now rate the Lab's plateau as a **moderately high recharge zone**.

Since 1943, approximately 18 million cubic feet of solid radioactive and chemical wastes were disposed onsite at the Lab. In its early years, the Lab discharged uncounted millions of gallons of untreated radioactive and chemical liquid wastes into surrounding canyons. Precipitation and liquid effluent were thought to percolate slowly, but fractures could provide quicker pathways for contaminated water to our aquifer. Los Alamos, located near an extinct volcano and beside a rift valley, has **numerous seismic faults** running underneath it. These faults are possibly significant recharge pathways to our regional aquifer.

Canyons around the Lab are characterized by concentrated, high recharge rates and potentially rapid transport to our deep aquifer. The canyon bottoms provide direct access to intermediate or "perched" aquifers. Discharge from these perched zones results in recharge to our underlying regional aquifer. Our regional aquifer provides drinking water for much of north central New Mexico.

Santa Fe obtains most of its **drinking water** from our regional aquifer via the Buckman wells located just east across the Rio Grande from LANL. According to a 2002 report by LANL hydrologists, the Buckman wells field draws roughly **one-third water of its water from across the Rio Grande** and at least partially from under LANL property.

Northern NM is (fortunately) in the middle of one of the wettest winters in many years. However, with every drop of rain or snow that falls, we should be reminded that, in the long run, there is a **potential threat to our very own faucets from waste at LANL**.

--Scott Kovac

## PLUTONIUM IN PAINT CANS?

The independent Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board has formally recommended that the Department of Energy "improve the packaging and storage conditions of its large inventory of nuclear materials once used for weapons manufacture." The Board noted "sites continue to rely on container types that have been used historically, but have no technically justified safety or design basis. These container types are generally forms of packaging typically used in non-nuclear applications (e.g., **paint cans, food pack cans**)." **Thin-walled "slip-lid cans" with loose-fitting covers closed only by tape** are also used, even for very dangerous plutonium-238 (approximately 270 times more radioactive than the more common Pu-239). The Board directed DOE to "[i]ssue a requirement that nuclear material packaging meet technically justified criteria for safe handling and storage" - big duh!

The University of California (UC) runs both the Los Alamos (LANL) and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories. LANL had serious Pu-238 contamination of multiple workers in 2001 and 2003, the latter due to a slip-lid can leak which has still not been cleaned up. The Board stated, "the technical adequacy of packaging... for nuclear materials, including liquids, is dependent on the safety bases [i.e., safety plans and protocols] of individual facilities." Yet **LANL's plutonium facility has not had an updated, approved safety basis since 1996!**

Further, an audit by the DOE's Inspector General found that "[t]hese materials are kept in containers that are **not acceptable for long-term storage**." The closure date for the Lab's nuclear materials stabilization program has been pushed back from 2002 to 2010, costing \$78 million more, while the stand down to all Lab operations because of security and safety concerns has cost taxpayers \$367 million.

Livermore's plutonium facility, the "Superblock", has been idle since January 15th due to its own safety problems. The Board found that 15% of weapons-related nuclear materials stored there are in **technically unjustified packaging more than five years old**. Meanwhile, Livermore is pushing to increase its plutonium inventory from a storage limit of 1,540 pounds to 3,300 pounds.

We think it's way past time for the Labs and UC to get real about stabilizing nuclear materials...above the indefinite preservation and so-called improvement of nuclear weapons!

--Jay Coghlan



corroded "food pack" can  
containing plutonium,  
Hanford Nuclear Reservation



Back in the last issue of the WatchDog we told you about the more than 100 drums of waste that the Idaho National Laboratory illegally sent to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in Carlsbad, New Mexico. Well, the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) fined the Department of Energy \$2.1 million for that mistake. Go, Environment Department! But just as we thought that NMED was actually taking a serious enforcement stance toward WIPP, our dreams and hopes were smashed into a thousand pieces. Or, as a colleague put it: "We were really just let down." Why? Because the Environment Department settled with DOE for \$90 thousand instead of the \$2.1 million.

The excuse for the Environment Department's cave-in is that DOE will now fund the Department's WIPP oversight office in Carlsbad-- at \$600,000 per year for the next three years. Hey, that isn't so bad, is it? Well, it is when you understand that DOE was going to be paying for it anyway, regardless of this fine! The oversight office is an attempt to replace the now defunct Environmental Evaluation Group (EEG), an effective independent oversight group that DOE stopped funding last April.

One more (non-WIPP) item to mention: Remember Yucca Mountain in Nevada? It's the site that President Bush authorized to be a dumpsite for the high-level nuclear reactor waste problem we have in the US. Here's something pretty strange: apparently the folks assigned to estimate how quickly the waste would leak from the facility *falsified their results*. Now no one at DOE is giving any further information about the falsified data, but the leak estimates are about as crucial as any figures could be.

DOE had planned on having Yucca open and accepting waste by 1998, has spent over \$6 billion dollars on the project and had hoped at least to have a license by the end of the year. Well, that pesky license thing might have to wait a little longer now!

--Geoff Petrie



**Not pretty:** Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) will not clean up a dozen major radioactive and hazardous waste dumps, but instead will merely "cap and cover" them. 600 "potential release sites" might need cleanup, if only the investigations were completed. Offsite plutonium stormwater migration is a hundred times greater after the big Los Alamos fire five years ago. **Cleanup funds have been slashed in half since 1995, while nuclear weapons programs doubled.** Cleanup is to be transferred to the weaponeers themselves.

Fortunately, the State of New Mexico recently forced DOE and the Lab to sign a comprehensive **cleanup compliance order**. Governor Bill Richardson, New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) Secretary Ron Curry and his staff deserve enormous credit for sticking to their guns, despite four lawsuits filed by DOE and the University of California (LANL's manager) against New Mexico--followed by two tortuous years of negotiations.

This is very good news; the bad news is the order's two perhaps fatal flaws. First, it is **not yet truly a cleanup order**; it is instead a glorified (but enforceable) information request that *should* lead to real cleanup once the needed information is obtained (data which the Lab has obfuscated for many years). Nevertheless, NMED has laid an excellent foundation for future State-mandated cleanup of LANL.

The second problem: **to what standard** will the Lab will be cleaned up? The danger is that NMED might preemptively surrender to site-wide "industrial use" instead of a **residential or agricultural standard**. "Industrial use" may seem logical since the Lab is federal property with no residences or agriculture within its boundaries. However, that wasn't true until the U.S. government forcibly seized the land some sixty years ago, and certainly will not be true indefinitely into the future.

The actual industrial footprint of Lab operations is surprisingly small. "Industrial use" allows **hundreds of times the amount of contaminants to be left forever**--an excuse for undermining the need for cleanup altogether. The Lab has already self-declared 60% of its property to be within a "Manufacturing and Industrial" zone, and is planning to expand it dramatically.

NMED declares that each potential cleanup site will be subject to public review, including future land-use designations. This cries for sustained citizen involvement (NukeWatch will be there!). But rather than fighting case-by-case, it would be far better if NMED determined that Lab property not actively used for nuclear weapons "industry and manufacturing" were subject to residential or agricultural cleanup standards. For that matter, why shouldn't all nuclear weapons "industry and manufacturing" also be subject to cleanup standards that truly protect future generations?

To quote Shakespeare, there comes a time in the affairs of men which, taken at the tide, leads on to victory. In the face of escalating federal deficits and the potential rollback of environmental laws, **the next decade is the very time to get LANL cleaned up, if it is ever to be done.** That is what all New Mexicans should demand!

--Jay Coghlan



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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.

**Inside this issue: Surprise, Surprise...Next Year's Federal Budget is Kind to Weapons and Cruel to Cleanup; Contamination Pathways to the Aquifer; Plutonium in Paint Cans; LANL Cleanup = Cap and Cover?**



· IN MEMORIAM ·  
**HANS BETHE**  
1906 - 2005

**Theoretical Giant of the Manhattan Project  
Nobel Prizewinner for Theory of Stellar Energy  
Passionate Arms Control Advocate**

Hans Bethe, a refugee from Nazi Germany, served as Director of the Theoretical Division at Los Alamos at the dawn of the atomic age. He staunchly opposed Edward Teller's Hydrogen Bomb which he labeled the "ultimate disaster." He defended Robert Oppenheimer against Teller's allegations of Communist ties. He was a driving force behind the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty, which ended atmospheric testing. Long opposed to missile defense systems, which he saw as technically infeasible and part of a spiraling arms race, he was the elder statesman opposing Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" program. In the 1990's he asked President Clinton to declare that the US would develop no more new nuclear weapons.

*...I feel the most intense relief that these weapons have not been used since World War II, mixed with the horror that tens of thousands of such weapons have been built....But in some countries nuclear weapons development still continues...individual scientists can still influence this process by withholding their skills. Accordingly, I call on all scientists in all countries to cease and desist from work creating, developing, improving and manufacturing further nuclear weapons; and for that matter, other weapons of potential mass destruction such as chemical and biological weapons.*

from an Open Letter by Hans Bethe, 1995  
see full text at [http://www.haverford.edu/math/wdavidon/hans\\_bethe.html](http://www.haverford.edu/math/wdavidon/hans_bethe.html)



**nuclear watch new mexico**

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