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Contact: Scott Kovac, Nuclear Watch NM, 505.989.7342, scott@nukewatch.org

NNSA Considers Stuffing More Plutonium Into New Facility

Despite the fact that no one has come up with a good reason to increase plutonium pit production for the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile, officials want to study the possibility of radically increasing the amount of plutonium allowed in a recently completed laboratory at the Los Alamos National Laboratory.

The Deputy Administrator for National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) Defense Programs, Don Cook, has requested an analysis to increase the radioactive materials inventory in the recently completed Radiological Laboratory Utility Office Building (RLUOB) to up to 400 grams of plutonium-239, the isotope used in nuclear weapons. The RLUOB, which originally was limited to 8.4 grams of Pu 239, was built as Phase 1 of the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Project at LANL that would have expanded plutonium pit production to 50 - 80 pits per year (pits are the radioactive cores of nuclear weapons). LANL's current capacity is 20 pits per year. Phase 2 of the CMRR project, the "Nuclear Facility," was canceled because of lack of clear need and a bulging ten-fold increase in costs.

This RLUOB, along with some floor space in the existing Plutonium Facility (PF-4), will replace the old Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Building, which is slated for closure in 2019. The Laboratory was working on a plutonium strategy to move out of CMR and maintain the current plutonium capability.

But NNSA recently increased the maximum amount of radiological materials allowed in the RLOUB, and all "radiological" facilities, from 8.4 grams to 38.6 grams. Internal Lab documents floated plans that could have increased the limit again by two or three times by treating each little laboratory in the RLUOB as its own radiological facility. This could have increased the limit to 115.8 grams of Pu239.

But NNSA apparently wants to go big. The new analysis is to consider the RLUOB as a Hazard Category 3 nuclear facility, which is a huge step up from its current designation as a radiological facility.

Scott Kovac, Research and Operations Director for Nuclear Watch New Mexico, said, "This turkey of a plan is stuffed with bad ideas - The RLUOB is not seismically qualified for that amount of plutonium. A new supplemental environmental impact statement will be needed. There is no need for more plutonium pits, except for new

nuclear weapons, because they last for around 100 years and nuclear weapons stockpiles are decreasing. And apparently LANL can't safely handle plutonium anyway, as major operations with plutonium have been paused since June 2013 because of nuclear criticality safety issues. Finally, it was LANL's improper handling of plutonium waste that contaminated 21 workers at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, causing it to close with at least a half billion dollars in costs to reopen. We say no to more plutonium at Los Alamos!"

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Read the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board report here-
http://www.dnfsb.gov/sites/default/files/Board%20Activities/Reports/Site%20Rep%20Weekly%20Reports/Los%20Alamos%20National%20Laboratory/2014/wr_20141024_65.pdf