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Some Background on Plutonium Pit Production at the Los Alamos Lab

Santa Fe, NM - The Washington Post has published the first in a series of articles on nuclear safety lapses in plutonium pit production at the Los Alamos Lab. Plutonium pits are the fissile cores of nuclear weapons that when imploded initiate the thermonuclear detonation of modern weapons.

- The former production site, the Rocky Flats Plant near Denver, was shut down by a 1989 FBI raid investigating environmental crimes. A special grand jury indicted both DOE officials and the contractor, but its report was sealed by a federal judge at the urging of the local federal attorney general. It was only by sheer luck that a major plutonium fire on Mother's Day 1969 didn't contaminate Denver with highly carcinogenic plutonium.
- Senior DOE officials promised New Mexicans 20 years ago that serious lessons were learned from the Rocky Flats Plant and re-established plutonium pit production at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) would always be safe. Since then the Los Alamos Lab has spent billions of taxpayers' money on plutonium pit production, but as the Washington Post article documents still can't do it safely.
- As the Washington Post article reports, a serious nuclear criticality incident was narrowly averted in July 2011, which resulted in the three-year shut down of LANL's main plutonium facility. Nevertheless, according to the FY 2011 LANL Performance Evaluation Report, the Lab contractor was paid \$50 million in pure profit for that year. These Performance Evaluation Reports are the report card whereby the government determines how much the taxpayer will pay nuclear weapons contractors. The government denied taxpayer access to these reports until NukeWatch successfully sued for them.
- A radioactive waste barrel improperly prepared by LANL ruptured underground at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), shutting down that multi-billion dollar facility for nearly three years. Radioactive waste disposal at WIPP will remain constrained for years, raising the question of where future LANL bomb-making wastes will go.
- Plutonium facilities at LANL are supposed to be designed to withstand a serious earthquake that is supposed to occur only once in every 10,000 years. The last serious earthquake near the Lab is believed to have occurred 11,500 years ago. Although there is no exact linear correlation, LANL is in a sense "overdue" for a serious seismic event given its numerous geologic faults.
- Congress has legislated a requirement that the Los Alamos Lab expand plutonium pit production, regardless of the technical needs of the stockpile. That requirement was

drafted by professional staff on the Strategic Forces Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, one of whom was originally from the Sandia nuclear weapons lab. That the existing stockpile doesn't need pit production is demonstrated by the fact that none has been scheduled since LANL caught up with 29 W88 pits that were stopped when the Rocky Flats Plant was shut down.

- At NukeWatch's request former senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) required an independent study of the lifetimes of pits. The expert conclusion was that plutonium pits last at least a century, more than double government estimates (the oldest pits in the stockpile are now around 45 years old). Moreover, there are some 15,000 existing plutonium pits stored at the Pantex Plant near Amarillo, TX.
- Future plutonium pit production is for a new so called "Interoperable Warhead" that is suppose to function both as a land-based ICBM and sub-launched nuclear warhead. The nuclear weapons labs are pushing this \$13 billion make-work project that the Navy doesn't want. Ironically, new-design pits for the Interoperable Warhead may hurt national security because they cannot be tested in a full-scale nuclear weapons test, or alternatively testing them would have severe international proliferation consequences.
- Given all this, why expand plutonium pit production when apparently it can't be done safely and may decrease, not increase, our national security? One strong reason is the huge contractor profits to be had under the one trillion dollar-plus "modernization" of the nuclear weapons stockpile and production complex initiated under Obama, which Trump promises to expand. Far from just "modernization", existing nuclear weapons are being given new military capabilities despite denials at the highest levels of government.
- The directors of the Livermore, Sandia and Los Alamos nuclear weapons labs in truth wear two hats, the first as lab directors, the second as presidents of the for-profit limited liability corporations running the labs. This inherent conflict-of-interest that skews U.S. nuclear weapons policy should be brought to an end.

Jay Coghlan, NukeWatch Director, commented, "The New Mexican congressional delegation kowtows to the nuclear weapons industry in our state. I specifically call upon my two senators Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich to certify within this calendar year that future plutonium pit production at the Los Alamos Lab will be safe, or otherwise end their support for it."

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The Washington Post article is available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/safety-lapses-undermine-nuclear-warhead-work-at-los-alamos/2017/06/17/87f051ee-510d-11e7-b064-828ba60fbb98_story.html

The article is also being carried in *The New Mexican* at http://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local_news/repeated-safety-lapses-hobble-lanl-s-work-on-u-s/

For more on expanded plutonium pit production please see <https://nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/PitProductionFactSheet.pdf>