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New Contractors Selected For Expanded Nuclear Weapons Production at Los Alamos

Santa Fe, NM – Today the Department of Energy’s National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) announced its choice for the new management and operating contract for the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL).

The new contractor, Triad National Security, LLC, is a limited liability company consisting of the Battelle Memorial Institute, the University of California and Texas A&M University. All three are non-profits, and it is unclear how this will affect New Mexico gross receipts taxes.

Battelle claims to be the world’s largest non-profit technology research and development organization, and manages a number of labs including the Lawrence Livermore and Idaho National Laboratories. Texas A&M was founded in 1876 as the state's first public institution of higher learning and has the largest nuclear engineering program in the country. DOE Secretary Rick Perry is an avid A&M alumnus.

The new contract includes a five-year base time with five one-year options, for a total of 10 years if all options are exercised. The estimated value of the contract is \$2.5 billion annually.

The University of California (UC) ran the Lab from its beginning in 1943 until June 2006, when Los Alamos National Security, LLC (LANS), composed of the University of California (UC), Bechtel, AECOM and BWX Technologies, Inc., took over. That contract had a ten-year base period with ten one-year options, for a total of 20 years if all options were exercised. But LANS was terminated with nine years left of possible options. This was primarily due to LANS improperly preparing a barrel of radioactive wastes that ruptured, closing the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant for nearly three years. NNSA did not clarify why it is now issuing a shorter contract.

This change in contract follows a May 10, 2018 announcement by NNSA that production of plutonium pits, the fissile cores of nuclear weapons, will be expanded to at least 30 pits per year at LANL, and an additional 50 pits per year at the Savannah River Site. The Los Alamos Lab is the birthplace of nuclear weapons, and it is tying its future to increased nuclear weapons production, with the active support of the New Mexico congressional delegation. The Lab proposed, but failed to convince NNSA, to produce all 80 plutonium pits per year. LANL’s core research, testing and production programs for nuclear weapons now comprise 70% of its ~\$2.5 billion annual budget, while much of the Lab’s remaining budget indirectly supports those programs.

Lisa E. Gordon-Hagerty, the new NNSA Administrator, testified during her confirmation hearing that expanded plutonium pit production is her number one priority. However, expanded

production is NOT needed to maintain the safety and reliability of the existing nuclear weapons stockpile. In fact, no pit production for the existing nuclear weapons stockpile has been scheduled since 2011, and none is scheduled for the future. Up to 15,000 “excess” pits and another 5,000 in “strategic reserve” are already stored at DOE’s Pantex Plant near Amarillo, TX. In 2006 independent experts found that pits last a least a century (they currently average 40 years old). A 2012 follow-on study by the Livermore Lab found that the “graceful aging of plutonium also reduces the immediate need for a modern high-capacity manufacturing facility to replace pits in the stockpile.”

Future pit production is for speculative future new designs being pushed by the nuclear weapons labs, so-called Interoperable Warheads for both land- and sub-launched missiles that the Navy does not want. Moreover, future pits will NOT be exact replicas of existing pits. This could have serious potential consequences because heavily modified plutonium pits cannot be full-scale tested, or alternatively could prompt the U.S. to return to nuclear weapons testing, which would have severe international proliferation consequences.

Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch Director, commented, “Regardless of who runs the Lab, LANL will decrease mission diversification and increase nuclear weapons production, while holding cleanup flat at a tenth of its weapons budget. New Mexico been a nuclear weapons colony since WWII, and adding Battelle, Texas A&M, and the University of California is just more of the same. There will be little if any added benefit for New Mexico’s citizens.”