



For immediate release January 15, 2016

Contacts: Jay Coghlan, NWNM, 505.989.7342, c. 505.470.3154, jay[at]nukewatch.org

National Nuclear Security Administration Gives Green Light To Expanded Plutonium Pit Production at Los Alamos

Santa Fe, NM – Today the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board, an independent agency commissioned by Congress, posted a weekly report that makes explicit a decision by the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) to expand plutonium pit production at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). Plutonium pits are the fissile cores or “triggers” of modern two-stage thermonuclear weapons, but they are also atomic weapons in their own right (a plutonium bomb incinerated Nagasaki in August 1945). Plutonium pit production has always been the chokepoint preventing industrial-scale U.S. nuclear weapons production ever since a FBI raid investigating environmental crimes shut down the notorious Rocky Flats Plant near Denver in 1989.

Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch Director, commented, “Expanded plutonium pit production at the Los Alamos Lab is really all about future new-design nuclear weapons with new military capabilities produced through so-called Life Extension Programs for existing nuclear weapons.” The relevant case-in-point is that LANL is now tooling up to produce pits for one type of warhead (the W87) to use in an “Interoperable Warhead” that will combine two other warheads (the W78, a land-based ICBM warhead, and the W88, a sub-launched warhead), clearly a radically new design even if as claimed only existing nuclear weapons components are used.

Coghlan further commented, “The real irony is that this Interoperable Warhead has been delayed for at least five years, if not forever, because of its enormous estimated expense and Navy skepticism. Yet this doesn't keep LANL and the NNSA from spending billions of taxpayer dollars to upgrade existing and build new production facilities for unnecessary and provocative expanded plutonium pit production.”

Specifically, NNSA and LANL seek to raise the administrative limit on plutonium in the existing Radiological Lab (“RLUOB” in the Safety Board report below) from an original 8.4 grams to 400 grams, and proceed with the “Plutonium Modular Approach project.” In 2012, in the face of exploding costs and rising citizen opposition, NNSA dropped its proposal to build a \$6.5 billion Walmart-sized “Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Project-Nuclear Facility” for expanded plutonium pit production of up to 80 pits per year. There was no technical justification for this expanded production, other than unspecified “Department of Defense requirements.”

These new moves by NNSA and LANL, which will cost around \$4 billion before the usual cost overruns, are just another way to achieve their goal of raising plutonium pit production to up to 80 plutonium pits per year. Raising the amount of plutonium in the Radiological Lab will enable LANL to conduct all needed analytical chemistry quality control samples of new pits, as the Safety Board memo says to “primarily support the increased capacity required for larger pit manufacturing rates.” The Plutonium Modular Approach project will be newly constructed

underground facilities for hot operations such as a plutonium foundry, likely beginning with two modules at a billion dollars each. It should be noted that proposed major federal actions require the opportunity for public review and comment under the National Environmental Policy Act, which has not been done for what NNSA calls this alternative plutonium strategy. Nevertheless, increased funding for LANL's plutonium infrastructure will be likely included in the pending federal budget for FY 2017, scheduled to be released Monday February 9.

There is no need for expanded plutonium pit production to maintain the safety and reliability of the existing nuclear weapons stockpile, but it is vital for future new-designs that the nuclear weaponeers want. In fact, the U.S. government is planning to spend a trillion dollars over the next 30 years to "modernize" and completely rebuild its nuclear forces, despite its pledge in the 1970 NonProliferation Treaty to enter into serious negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament.

Background

In 1996 the plutonium pit production mission was formally relocated to LANL, with an approved upper limit of 20 pits per year. NNSA has tried four times since then to expand plutonium pit production. This started with a proposed "Modern Pit Facility" capable of producing up to 450 pits per year, with no justification of why that Cold War-like level of production was needed. In all four cases, in response to successful citizen activism, Congress either rejected or NNSA dropped efforts to expand production, in large part because of a pit life study that New Mexico Senator Jeff Bingaman required at Nuclear Watch's request. That 2006 study by independent experts found that plutonium pits last at least 100 years (with no proscribed end date), more than double NNSA's previous estimates of 45 years.

Nevertheless, NNSA now seeks for the fifth time to expand plutonium pit production beyond the currently approved level of 20 pits per year at LANL. After having produced 30 pits for the W88 sub-launched warhead (which was in production when the Rocky Flats Plant was shut down), there are no current requirements for plutonium pit production to maintain stockpile safety and reliability.

In the meanwhile, funding for cleanup at the Los Alamos Lab is being cut, while nuclear weapons programs that caused the mess to begin with are thriving. As a final irony, these plans to expand plutonium pit production are now being implemented, despite the fact that 1) major operations at LANL's main plutonium facility have been suspended since June 2013 because of nuclear criticality safety concerns; and 2) the Los Alamos Lab has no place to send its radioactive plutonium pit production wastes ever since it sent a drum that ruptured and closed down the multi-billion dollar Waste Isolation Pilot Plant.

Nuclear Watch New Mexico is confident that this latest attempt to expand plutonium pit production will fall apart as well, but only as a result of continuing strong citizen activism.

###

- Relevant excerpt from Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board Weekly LANL Report: http://www.dnfsb.gov/sites/default/files/Board%20Activities/Reports/Site%20Rep%20Weekly%20Reports/Los%20Alamos%20National%20Laboratory/2015/wr_20151218_65.pdf

Los Alamos Report for Week Ending December 18, 2015

MEMORANDUM FOR: S.A. Stokes, Technical Director FROM: R.K. Verhaagen and J.W. Plaue

DNFSB Staff Activity: R. L. Jackson was onsite to plan oversight activities associated with Plutonium Infrastructure Strategy. Accordingly, he met with key project staff and walked down the Plutonium Facility, the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research (CMR) building, and the Radiological Laboratory Utility Office Building (RLUOB).

Plutonium Infrastructure Strategy: Late last month, the Deputy Secretary of Energy approved a restructuring of the subprojects covered under the CMR Replacement project. There are now four subprojects: (1) RLUOB Equipment Installation, Phase 2; (2) Plutonium Facility Equipment Installation, Phase 1; (3) Plutonium Facility Equipment Installation, Phase 2; and (4) Re- categorizing the RLUOB to Hazard Category 3 with a material-at-risk limit of 400 g plutonium- 239 equivalent. The first two subprojects enable LANL to cease programmatic activities in the CMR by 2019, while the latter two subprojects primarily support the increased capacity required for larger pit manufacturing rates. The memo requests an updated project execution plan within 90 days and indicates approval authority will remain with the DOE Deputy Secretary for subprojects 2–4 and with the NNSA Administrator for subproject 1.

In a separate action, the DOE Deputy Secretary also approved the mission need Critical Decision (CD)-0 for the Plutonium Modular Approach project. This project addresses life extension needs for the existing Plutonium Facility in support of Department of Defense requirements and Congressional Direction. The CD-0 schedule range for project completion is December 2025 to December 2027.

- For an extensive history of successful citizen activism against plutonium pit production see <http://nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/Pit-Production-History.pdf>