

NUCLEAR WEAPONS ROUNDUP: Congressional Opposition to Bush's Plans Builds

In a stunning development, a House Subcommittee **zeroed out** President Bush's funding requests for certain **key nuclear weapons programs**. This Subcommittee recently marked up the Fiscal Year 2005 Energy & Water Development appropriations bill. While doing so, it completely eliminated funding for a new super bomb plant (the "Modern Pit Facility"), the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (a nuclear "bunker-buster"), Advanced Concepts ("mini-nukes") and the Enhanced Readiness Program (designed to shorten the lead time for returning to full-scale nuclear weapons testing).

In a prepared statement, David Hobson (R.-OH), Chairman of the House Energy and Water Development Appropriations Subcommittee, observed that "much of the DOE weapons complex is still sized to support a Cold War stockpile. The NNSA [DOE's semi-autonomous National Nuclear Security Administration] needs to take a "time-out" on new initiatives until it completes a review of its weapons complex in relation to security needs, budget constraints, and this new stockpile plan."

The stockpile plan that Hobson referred to is the annual classified **Stockpile Memorandum** that sets forth the level of nuclear weapons that the U.S will both deploy and keep in "responsive reserve." The Executive Branch is required to deliver a stockpile memo to Congress every year, but Congress rejected the last two as being incomplete. A new memo was finally delivered to Congress only a week before the Subcommittee's markup. Although no details are publicly available, Hobson and others have generally stated that the memo indicates that the present stockpile of some 10,000 weapons could be reduced by as much as half. What's crucial, and remains unresolved, is how many weapons would actually be **irreversibly dismantled** or simply shunted into a responsive reserve from which they could be **readily re-deployed**. The Bush Administration has been intentionally fuzzy on this crucial distinction. Last year Carl Levin (D.-MI; ranking minority member of the Senate Armed Services Committee) called the proposed shifting of nuclear weapons to a responsive reserve "Arthur Andersen accounting."

The size of the future stockpile obviously plays a key role in the NNSA's push for the Modern Pit Facility (MPF). Plutonium pits are the critical (pun intended) nuclear weapons component. The MPF is planned to produce up to 450 pits per year, enough to maintain 10,000 nuclear weapons. Clearly, if the stockpile is to be dramatically reduced, even Congress would likely agree that **the proposed MPF could be substantially downsized or dispensed with altogether**. This is important to New Mexico because two of the five sites under consideration for

the MPF are here. Equally important is Hobson's directive that the NNSA take "time out" on its new initiatives, meaning the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP), mini-nukes and the drive to return to full-scale testing. New Mexico's two nuclear weapons labs, Los Alamos and Sandia, are deeply involved in all of these issues.

The bottom line: The House Subcommittee's zeroing of requesting funding for the RNEP, mini-nukes, the MPF and Enhanced Readiness is fantastic. However, the big question is **what will the Senate do?** New Mexicans have a special responsibility, as our own senior senator Pete Domenici is commonly viewed as the protector of the new "initiatives" that the nuclear weaponeers seem so desperately to want. In fact, Pete just voted against an amendment to the FY05 Senate Defense Authorization Act that would have stopped RNEP and mini-nukes development. (Bingaman voted in favor, but the amendment lost 55-42.) The crucial struggle will be in the appropriations process that actually ponies up the money. Domenici chairs the Senate Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development Appropriations, the exact Senate counterpart to Hobson's Subcommittee. The struggle over funding these new initiatives may well boil down to a fight between Domenici and Hobson in House-Senate conference (maybe as soon as August).

New Mexicans should be telling Pete now that the last thing the world needs is new nuclear weapons, a bomb plant in which to build them, or saber-rattling in the form of full-scale tests. Let's get on with the business of ridding the world of weapons of mass destruction by providing a solid example here at home.

--Jay Coghlan

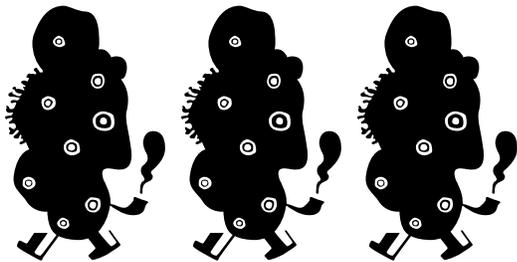


cartoon by Jamie Chase

Fatal Doses Possible: Time to Shut Down LANL's Criticality Experiments!

The Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (DNFSB) recently transmitted to the DOE's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) two reports outlining the potentially severe risks of conducting "criticality" experiments at Los Alamos National Laboratory's (LANL's) Technical Area-18. The DNFSB is an independent agency created by Congress that oversees safety issues at DOE's nuclear facilities, but has no regulatory power. Criticality experiments use "assemblies" of enriched uranium and/or plutonium to create self-sustaining nuclear chain reactions.

Three out of five of TA-18's critical assemblies are slated to be relocated to the Nevada Test Site by September 2004, but this process has already been long delayed. According to the DNFSB, two assemblies "will continue to operate for the near term at TA-18 in a campaign mode." In 2000 DOE fined LANL \$605,000 for breaking safety rules at TA-18, but



For more info, see www.nukewatch.org.

since the University of California (LANL's manager) is a "non-profit" it didn't have to pay. A November 2003 *Vanity Fair* article reported that the DOE nuclear safety officer at Los Alamos had to reject as a final safety measure a scientist's offer to drive a bulldozer into a critical assembly if it ever went out of control. TA-18 has over 3 tons of plutonium and highly enriched uranium, plus 20 tons of depleted and natural uranium and thorium, but has failed mock terrorist attacks on several occasions. Finally, mechanical malfunctions have repeatedly occurred during TA-18's criticality experiments.

Highlights of the DNFSB reports:

- **"Postulated Accidents.** TA-18 is located one-half mile from the nearest site boundary and 3 miles from the town of White Rock. The laboratory buildings containing the critical assemblies offer no confinement in the event of an accident with a radiological release." In one possible accident scenario the plutonium "core would partially vaporize; and, conservatively calculated, the maximally exposed off-site individual would receive on the order of 1,000 rem..." Chest x-rays are typically 5 *millirem*, or five-thousandths of a rem. A 1,000 rem dose is fatal!
- **"Operational Oversight by NNSA and LANL..."** Recent federal oversight in TA-18 has been minimal... support of LANL's senior management for [the Reactor Safety Committee] has been marginal at best. In 2000, most of the committee members resigned... Committee reports during the last 3 years have tended to focus more on advocating for continued operations (e.g., mission relocation impacts) than on independently identifying safety issues and verifying adequacy of their resolution."
- **"Conclusions..."** a sequence of operator errors at TA-18 could initiate its worst accident - an uncontrolled reactivity excursion resulting in melting and partial vaporization of a plutonium core sample... NNSA and LANL are currently relying on a set of administrative controls and interim compensatory measures to prevent this accident... However, most of these controls are missing from the current list of those to be verified in response to the Board's Recommendation."

Nuclear Watch New Mexico demands that DOE and LANL suspend criticality experiments at TA-18 until all safety issues are completely resolved and verified as such by the Board. It's unthinkable for LANL to plan on conducting such high-risk experiments while there is any uncertainty. The Board and DOE should vigorously intervene and make it right or close TA-18 down once and for all.

--Jay Coghlan

Is RACER A Risk?

The new RACER project being implemented by the Risk Assessment Corporation (RAC) introduced itself in a May 18 public meeting. RACER stands for Risk Analysis, Communication, Evaluation and Reduction. Its stated goal is to create a process in which Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) will work with the community to make decisions about the most effective ways to reduce health risks and environmental impacts resulting from LANL operations. DOE funds RACER through the University of Colorado.

RACER's first step has been to gather environmental data from LANL, the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED), EPA, and other sources relating to radionuclides and chemicals released from the Lab. This data, available on

CD, will also be available on the RAC website (www.racteam.com). RACER is seeking the involvement of stakeholders--defined as anyone affected or potentially affected by LANL contamination. The project is creating a fund to support stakeholder participation.

Dr. John Till (RAC President) took questions and comments from the audience. While observing that LANL had already made the decision to "cap and cover" its major waste dumps instead of cleaning them up, Jay Coghlan (NukeWatch Director) stated, "Our fear is that LANL could use the RACER project to directly or indirectly supplant future NMED enforcement activities." In response Till replied, "If that's the case, then I will have failed." --Scott Kovac

High-Level Waste: a ruse by any other name?

The problem of spent reactor rods and other high-level nuclear wastes, dangerous for more than 100,000 years, has been a grave concern for decades. Nuclear power plants across the country have high-level waste (HLW) piling up. The Yucca Mountain Site in Nevada, despite heated debate and questionable engineering, has been designated as the final dump for high-level wastes. But with Yucca Mountain long delayed, the Department of Energy (DOE) is looking for another repository for a lot of its high-level wastes left over from decades of bomb production.

The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in southern New Mexico is the only site in the country that is accepting transuranic nuclear waste. Because WIPP is open for business, DOE now wants to change its original mission so that it could accept some of its high-level radioactive wastes. But never fear; DOE wouldn't simply send high-level waste to WIPP. No, first they would change the name of the waste -- *and then send it to WIPP.*

DOE has been attempting to rename wastes that have been classified as high-level for some time now. In many instances the attempt to change the waste definition would allow DOE to leave the waste on-site indefinitely-- saving a good chunk of change for DOE, but denying desperately needed cleanup to the sites. This time the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) is attempting to nip DOE's semantic antics in the bud.

NMED recently submitted its own permit modification request to bar high-level wastes at WIPP. DOE strenuously opposes this modification, and has hired Pete Domenici, Jr. (yes, the son of our senior senator Pete Domenici) to fight it when it goes to hearing.

Already there has been questionable maneuvering by DOE with respect to this modification. Domenici (Junior, not Senator) requested at the last hour to delay the original hearing date. Without any public discussion, the hearing officer agreed to this unjustified request. This wasn't irritating just because of the time delay, but also because many non-profits opposed to HLW at WIPP had already put a great deal of time, effort and resources into the hearing date that had been previously agreed upon.

To make things a little more interesting, folks at Hanford (the former plutonium and tritium production site in Washington State --now one of the most contaminated in the world) believe that with a permit modification request in hand they can send some of their high-level tank wastes to WIPP. Additionally, events in the Senate came to a head when the Cantwell-Hollings amendment to the Defense Authorization Bill went to the floor. That amendment would have forced DOE to completely clean up tanks that store liquid HLW, and release \$350 million to the sites for cleanup. DOE is currently using this fund as "extortion" money. Unfortunately, the amendment, which needed only a majority to pass, lost in a 48 to 48 tie.

Do not allow DOE to bring high-level waste to WIPP. Be sure to make your views known when the NMED permit modification request comes to hearing in Santa Fe, New Mexico. We'll let you know the new hearing date on our website: www.nukewatch.org.

--Geoff Petrie

Low-Level Rad Wastes: into Landfills and Frying Pans?

The EPA recently asked for public comments on ways to 'simplify' the disposal of low-level nuclear waste. In effect, EPA is attempting to 'redefine' radioactive waste as safe for landfills not licensed for it. The essence of this proposal, formerly known as "Below Regulatory Concern," has been kicking around for years. EPA was now asking for citizen comments on how to allow low-level mixed radioactive waste to be dumped into these landfills, not *if* this should be allowed.

Low-level mixed waste (LLMW) is any mixture of low-level radioactive and hazardous (i.e., chemical) wastes. EPA describes dumping LLMW into landfills that are currently designed only for hazardous waste as a 'viable' option. These landfills are designed to not leak for only 30 years after closure, while LLMW can be radioactive for countless thousands of years. Using these landfills for nuclear waste would disperse radioactivity across the nation. Moreover, there is no requirement to inform people living near these landfills about the new radioactive hazards being dumped next to them.

Again, EPA is asking the old question, "How much harm can we get away with?" because they are basing the proposal on calculated risk. The proposal asks for comments on the minimum dose an individual should receive, not if the public should ever receive additional doses at all.

This proposal is another attempt to relieve the regulatory and financial burdens of industries that generate radioactive waste. As nuclear waste disposal costs continue to soar, DOE has, for many years, also sought permission to sell its radioactive scrap metals. They then could be recycled into everyday consumer goods (for example, toasters, jewelry, and children's toys). Again, citizens would be placed in close contact with radioactive materials without informed consent.

The New Mexico Environmental Department has expressed strong reservations over EPA's proposal. It's crucial that the public continue to take a stand against any deregulation of radioactive waste, and keep the burden of safe waste disposal on the shoulders of those who profit by generating it.

--Scott Kovac



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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: Congress Rebuffs Bush's Costly Weapons;
LANL Criticality Experiments are Dangerous! and That Old Ploy of Re-Naming Nuclear Wastes

What To Do!

- Call your elected officials and Governor Richardson and speak your piece on allowing Los Alamos TA-18 to continue criticality experiments while grave doubts persist concerning their safety. (See article on page 2.)
- Keep up to date on the New Mexico Environment Department's permit modification to prevent high-level waste from coming to WIPP-- and make your voice heard. Visit www.nukewatch.org for ongoing information and a new hearing date.
- Call your congresspeople and let them know your views on the development of new nuclear weapons such as the bunker-buster and mini-nukes. Your opinion is vital as Congress considers funding for them. (See front page article.)
- If you're not registered to vote, please do so today! NukeWatch believes that the coming November elections will be among the country's most important ever. Remember: If you don't vote, don't *itch!
- Throw the dawgs a bone (any contributions are tax deductible)!



nuclear watch new mexico

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