



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE, April 21, 2020

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

>120 Groups and Individuals Ask Udall and Heinrich to Extend Public Comment Period on Los Alamos Lab Plutonium Bomb Core Production

Santa Fe, NM – Today, on behalf of more than 120 groups and individuals, Nuclear Watch New Mexico sent a letter to New Mexico Senators Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich. It asks them to act upon their own words and demand that the public comment period be extended for plutonium “pit” bomb core production that the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) is fast tracking during the coronavirus epidemic. As sitting members of the Senate Appropriations and Armed Services Committees, Udall and Heinrich are in strong positions to make that demand of NNSA.

On April 8, 2020, at Senator Udall’s initiative, twenty-four senators (including Heinrich) wrote to the Office of Management and Budget asking that agency to:

“Instruct all federal agencies to indefinitely extend all open or announced upcoming public comment periods for rulemakings and administrative actions not related to the COVID-19 pandemic response... meaningful participation is an impossibility for tens of millions of Americans during this pandemic emergency period. We cannot reasonably expect the public to redirect attention from protecting themselves and families to comment on federal agency rules and proceedings that while important, are not related to the crisis at hand or its response.”¹

Preceding the Senators’ letter, on April 1 more than twenty organizations and individuals wrote to DOE Secretary Dan Brouillette and NNSA Administrator Lisa Gordon-Hagerty. They requested that the public comment period be extended to at least June 19, 2020 for NNSA’s *Draft Supplement Analysis of the 2008 Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement for the Continued Operation of Los Alamos National Laboratory for Plutonium Operations*. In addition, the Santa Clara Pueblo made its own independent request. The underlying issue is the quadrupled production of plutonium “pit” bomb cores for new nuclear weapons to at least 80 pits per year, divided between the Los Alamos Lab and the Savannah River Site (SRS) in South Carolina. However, new pit production at SRS is vulnerable to likely failure, possibly leaving the entire burden on LANL.

Given its agenda to ram through expanded plutonium pit production irrespective of the coronavirus epidemic, the NNSA extended the comment period a mere 15 days to May 8, 2020. The agency claimed that “a two month extension of the comment period would

¹ <https://www.tomudall.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/4.8.20%20United%20States%20Senate%20Letter%20to%20OMB%20Acting%20Director%20Vought%20FINAL%5b1%5d.pdf>

have a severe adverse impact on the detailed planning and coordination of this effort” to expand the production of plutonium pit bomb cores at the Los Alamos Lab. ²

However, it’s difficult to believe that an additional minimum of 30 days for the public to offer comment during the coronavirus pandemic would be “severe[ly] adverse” to NNSA’s plans for a number of reasons, including:

- NNSA’s consistent track record of massive cost overruns and broken schedules.
- The fact that FY 2021 funding for LANL’s nuclear weapons programs is slated to be increased by a third to \$2.9 billion, while at the same time DOE proposes to cut Lab cleanup nearly by half to \$120 million; and
- LANL’s chronic track record of nuclear safety infractions while NNSA has restricted the access of the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board that reports on it.

Moreover, expanded plutonium pit production is not only NOT needed, it may actually degrade national security. No future production is scheduled to maintain the safety and reliability of the existing nuclear weapons stockpile. Instead, future production is for heavily modified pits for speculative new-design nuclear weapons that can’t be tested because of the global testing moratorium, hence possibly lowering reliability.

Alternatively, new pits could prompt the U.S. to resume nuclear weapons testing, with severe international proliferation consequences. All of this is not necessary given that independent experts have concluded that plutonium pits last at least a century (pits in the active stockpile are now 40 years old or less). In addition, at least 15,000 existing pits are already stored at NNSA’s Pantex Plant near Amarillo, TX.

Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch Director commented, “New Mexicans of course expect their senators to say what they mean and mean what they say. Therefore, we’re confident that Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich will successfully persuade NNSA to extend the public comment period on plutonium pit production at the Los Alamos Lab until at least June 19. According to their own words, it’s the right thing to do.”

###

This press release is available online at <https://nukewatch.org/udall-heinrich-extension-pr-4-21-20-20/>

The letter to Senators Udall and Heinrich signed by more than 120 groups and individuals, two-thirds of whom are New Mexican constituents, is available at <https://nukewatch.org/udall-heinrich-public-comment-extension-letter-4-21-20/>

NNSA’s March 2020 *Draft Supplement Analysis of the 2008 Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement for the Continued Operation of Los Alamos National Laboratory for Plutonium Operations* is available at <https://www.energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2020/03/f72/draft-supplement-analysis-eis-0380-sa-06-lanl-pit-production-2020-03.pdf>

² NNSA letter, April 6, 2020, <https://nukewatch.org/nnsa-to-nukewatch-15-day-extension/>

The current deadline for comments, if not extended, is May 8. Comments can be emailed to lanlsweissa@nnsa.doe.gov, Subject line LANL SWEIS SA comment. NukeWatch NM will have sample comments available at www.nukewatch.org two weeks before whatever is the final deadline.