



DOE Rejects Comprehensive Cleanup at Los Alamos Lab Designates Expanded Nuclear Weapons Production as Preferred Future

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Santa Fe, NM – Today, in an informal conference hosted by the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED), the Department of Energy rejected future excavation, characterization and further treatment of its radioactive and toxic wastes at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Just five days ago, DOE’s National Nuclear Security Administration formally designated radically expanded nuclear weapons programs as the “preferred alternative” for the Lab’s future.¹ The key issue is the expanded production of plutonium “pit” bomb cores for the accelerating nuclear arms race.

In a draft Order, NMED directed DOE to comprehensively clean up “Area C,” a radioactive and toxic waste dump from the 1950s. Nuclear Watch New Mexico strongly supports NMED’s position. Area C is relatively small and shallow at 11 acres and not more than 25 feet deep. Therefore, it is an excellent model for future comprehensive cleanup at LANL, such as the much larger Area G waste dump. A public hearing is required before NMED can implement a final Order, but DOE seeks to delay that hearing as well.

The Department of Energy is adamantly against any exhumation of wastes at Area C whatsoever, perhaps over the fear of the precedent it would set. DOE is also clearly concerned over the impact that comprehensive cleanup could have on expanded plutonium pit production given Area C’s proximity to the Lab’s main plutonium facility. This is more evidence of DOE’s historic prioritization of nuclear weapons production over cleanup, causing yet more contamination and wastes. This mis-prioritization is compounded by the fact that no future pit production is to maintain the safety and reliability of the existing nuclear weapons stockpile. Instead, it is for new-design nuclear weapons that could prompt a return to full-scale testing.

LANL’s budget for nuclear weapons programs has more than doubled in the last decade. Contrary to public relations spin that the Lab is growing increasingly diversified, the budget percentage devoted to nuclear weapons has steadily grown to 79% of LANL’s \$5 billion annual budget. Cleanup, on the other hand, has remained static at around 6% of the Lab’s total budget.

According to the independent Government Accountability Office, expected completion of Lab cleanup has been repeatedly pushed back, most recently to 2043 with an estimated cost

¹ For more on a just-released draft site-wide environmental impact statement outlining the Lab’s future, please see <https://nukewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/LANL-SWEIS-Rigged-Alternatives-PR.pdf>

of \$7 billion.² But even this is a false cleanup given the Lab's plans to "cap and cover" some 800,000 cubic yards of radioactive and toxic wastes, leaving them permanently buried in unlined pits and shafts as a perpetual threat to groundwater.

As late as the late 1990s LANL was claiming that groundwater contamination was impossible, which we now know is completely false. In 2005 even the Lab acknowledged that "Future contamination at additional locations is expected over a period of decades to centuries as more of the contaminant inventory reaches the water table."³

As the Lab has become more and more a nuclear weapons production site for plutonium "pit" bomb cores, it remains woefully ignorant over the extent and depth of the contamination it has caused to the regional groundwater aquifer.⁴ At the same time, LANL continues to downplay widespread plutonium contamination in soil, water and plants.⁵

The capping and cover of Lab wastes has already failed at some locations (specifically the old dump near the Los Alamos airport and Area AB). In 2018, the DOE head of Lab cleanup programs was falsely claiming that cleanup was more than half complete.⁶

Jay Coghlan, Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, commented: "Comprehensive cleanup is essential to help guarantee protection of New Mexico's most precious asset, our limited, irreplaceable water resources. It will also create high-paying jobs. We commend the New Mexico Environment Department for trying to enforce comprehensive cleanup at the Lab and condemn DOE for blocking it."

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This press release is available online at <https://nukewatch.org/doe-rejects-cleanup-at-lanl-pr>

² DOE Needs to Address Weaknesses in Program and Contractor Management at Los Alamos, Government Accountability Office, July 2023, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105665.pdf>

³ <http://www.worldcat.org/title/los-alamos-national-laboratorys-hydrogeologic-studies-of-the-pajarito-plateau-a-synthesis-of-hydrogeologic-workplan-activities-1998-2004/oclc/316318363>, page 5-15

⁴ This involves a groundwater plume of toxic and carcinogenic hexavalent chromium (the contaminant of concern in the popular *Erin Brockovich* film) that is at least a mile long, half-mile wide and 100 feet deep but whose complete extent is still not known. For more see <https://nukewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Press-Release-on-New-Chromium-Plume-Report.pdf>

⁵ See *Super weapons grade 239+240Pu as a contaminant of concern in sediment, soil, water and vegetation: Acid Canyon and Los Alamos Canyon, New Mexico*, Dr. Michael Ketterer, August 13, 2024, <https://nukewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Ketterer-AcidCanyon-13Aug2024.pdf>

⁶ See DOE's glossy public relations claim at <https://nukewatch.org/documents-item/doe-2018-claim-lanl-cleanup-half-complete/>