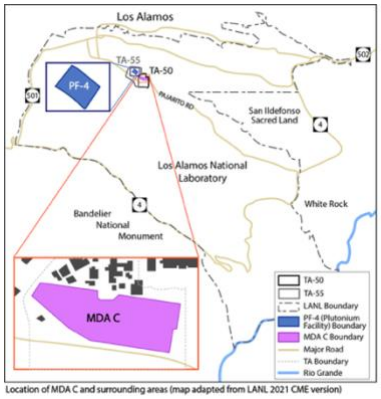
nuclear watch new mexico

The Future of Los Alamos Lab: More Nuclear Weapons or Cleanup?

Nuclear weapons research and production at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) have left serious soil and groundwater contamination — and the Lab only plans to radically expand the programs that caused this mess to begin with. LANL's nuclear weapons budget has doubled over the last decade and is getting another $1 billion boost in funding in FY 2026 alone. All other programs, including cleanup, are being cut or entirely deleted (such as renewable energy research). At the same time, LANL plans to "cleanup" on the cheap, which is to "cap and cover" more than one million cubic yards of existing radioactive and toxic wastes, leaving them permanently buried in unlined pits and trenches as a perpetual threat to groundwater.



Location of MDA C and surrounding areas (map adapted from LANL 2021 CME version)

The current case in point is "Area C," an inactive 11.8-acre dump consisting of 7 unlined pits and 108 shafts that disposed of radioactive and chemical wastes from 1948 to 1974. The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) has issued a draft Order requiring comprehensive cleanup, which Nuclear Watch strongly supports. However, the Department of Energy (DOE) and the Lab vehemently reject comprehensive cleanup, in large part because Area C is near LANL's plutonium "pit" bomb core production facility, known as "PF-4." DOE and LANL officials are concerned that excavating nearby radioactive and toxic wastes would adversely impact the morale of busy nuclear weapons production workers.

The depths of the unlined pits and shafts at Area C range from 10 to 25 feet and contain an estimated 198,000 cubic meters of radioactive and toxic wastes. According to the September 2023 NMED draft cleanup Order, americium-241, plutonium-238, plutonium-239, tritium, and uranium-235 were detected above background values at multiple locations and depths near Area C. Carcinogenic volatile organic compounds (generally used as industrial solvents) are also present. Intellus, the Lab's public environmental database, shows that plutonium and other contaminants have already migrated to the regional aquifer, which is an EPA designated "sole source" drinking water resource for ~250,000 northern New Mexicans. A 2005 LANL study concluded that more groundwater contamination is expected, for which the needed solution is Lab-wide comprehensive cleanup.

A 2005 LANL study explicitly stated, "Future contamination at additional locations is expected over a period of decades to centuries as more of the contaminant inventory reaches the water table."

Leaving large amounts of radioactive and toxic wastes in a shallow, unlined dump is simply not acceptable (plutonium-239 has a half-life of 24,100 years). NMED's September 2023 draft cleanup Order requires that the shafts and pits be fully excavated, and the wastes characterized and properly disposed of, with periodic sampling to ensure complete removal. In November 2023 the Department of Energy, N3B (the LANL cleanup contractor) and Nuclear Watch New Mexico submitted technical comments and requests for a public hearing, which gave NukeWatch legal standing as the only non-governmental organization participating in negotiations. A public hearing with cross examination of experts was originally scheduled for around March 2026, but its date is now uncertain because of DOE's legal maneuvering (see below). Ninety days after the hearing is held, NMED will publish a final decision that requires the Lab to submit a final cleanup plan. LANL and DOE are clearly trying to delay that public hearing.

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Despite being an inactive dumpsite since 1974, LANL is now claiming that Area C is "associated with active facility operations" and unilaterally "deferred" *any* cleanup at Area C until the Lab's plutonium "pit" bomb core production mission is completed. This effectively shuts the door forever on comprehensive cleanup, since DOE plans to produce new plutonium pit bomb cores for new-design nuclear weapons for the new arms race until at least 2050.

However, NMED has rejected LANL's claim of active facility operations at Area C, saying:

> DOE's continuous attempts to submit notifications and responses that disregard the regulatory direction previously provided by NMED is a direct contradiction to one of the general purposes of the 2016 CO [Consent Order governing cleanup] and does not reflect DOE's commitment to drive toward tangible, measurable environmental clean-up.

In our view, comprehensive cleanup of Area C is essential on its own merits, but also critical in establishing the standard for cleanup of the rest of the Lab. Fortunately, there is strong precedent in Area B, a 6-acre radioactive and toxic waste dump on land that Los Alamos County coveted for economic development (hence providing motivation for comprehensive cleanup). Despite finding more wastes at greater depths than expected, comprehensive cleanup of Area B cost only $192 million, or $32 million per acre (adjusted for inflation). Workers were protected by remote-controlled excavators and ambient contamination prevented by a temporary enclosure. Moreover, an even larger cleanup project at the Idaho National Laboratory demonstrated that DOE is more than capable of successful comprehensive cleanup, when it has the political will to do so.

But LANL and DOE do not want real cleanup at Area C. They have calculated the cost at $964 million, or $82 million per acre. Nuclear Watch believes genuine cleanup can be done for half that price. In any event, LANL is spending $5 billion in FY 2026 alone on provocative new nuclear weapons programs that caused the mess to begin with. We believe that taxpayers' money would be better used for cleanup that would permanently protect northern New Mexico's most precious asset, clean groundwater, while providing hundreds of high-paying jobs.

Waste disposed at Area G nears the surface of the 65-foot-deep Pit 38.

We advocate for a modern engineered landfill instead of the "cap and cover" that LANL and DOE want. Buried wastes should be dug up with remote-controlled excavators and characterized. All transuranic waste must be sent to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant. Cleanup costs and transportation risks can be greatly reduced by reburying low-level wastes, but only in lined landfills with leachate collection systems and continuous monitoring. Cleanup done right at Area C should become the model for the rest of the Lab. This is particularly important for Area G, a 63-acre dump containing up to one million cubic yards of radioactive and toxic wastes.

The time has come to convince the New Mexican congressional delegation and the governor that we deserve full, comprehensive, job-producing cleanup. Tell them that you reject prioritizing new nuclear weapons for the new nuclear arms race over cleanup. Real security for New Mexicans is protecting our precious groundwater for future generations!

Sources: DOE FY 2026 Congressional Budget Request; Investigation Report for Material Disposal Area C, LANL December 2006, p. 27; Corrective Measures Evaluation Report for Area C, DOE, June 2021 (100 MB, "withdrawn" by DOE July 25, 2025); Statement of Basis (Draft Order) MDA C, NMED, September 2023, p.7; Hydrogeological Studies of the Parajito Plateau (1998-2004), LANL, 2005, p. 5-15; Deferment of Corrective Action Activities for Solid Waste Management Unit 50-009 at Material Disposal Area C, DOE, June 2025; Response to DOE Deferral of Area C, NMED, July 2, 2025; ARRA Projects- LANL Lessons Learned, Material Disposal Area B (MDA B) Overview, 2012.

For more information, see www.nukewatch.org/area-c/ Stay tuned for the date and location of NMED's Area C cleanup public hearing at www.nukewatch.org