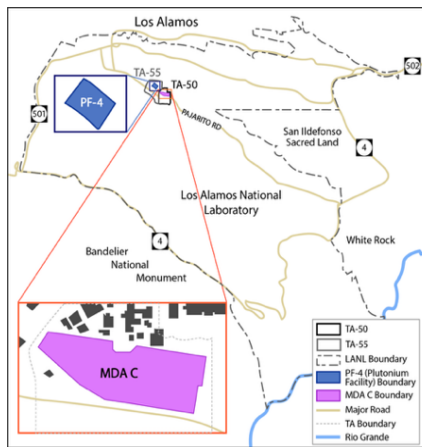


## **The Future of Los Alamos Lab: More Nuclear Weapons or Cleanup?**

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 jump 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.



The current case in point is “Area C,” an inactive 11.8-acre dump consisting of 7 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 recent NMED Area C 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. Volatile organic compounds (generally used as industrial solvents) are also present directly below Area C. 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 contamination of the groundwater aquifer is expected, which Lab-wide comprehensive cleanup can strongly help to prevent.

*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 March 2026, but its date is now

uncertain because of DOE's legal maneuvering described below. When finally held, the hearing will result in a recommendation by the Hearing Officer to NMED Secretary James Kenney on whether to cap and cover or comprehensively clean up Area C.

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 pit production mission is completed. This effectively shuts the door forever on comprehensive cleanup, since DOE's semi-autonomous National Nuclear Security Administration plans to produce new plutonium pit bomb cores for the new nuclear arms race until at least 2050.

NMED and Nuclear Watch do not agree. Cleanup of Area C must be done properly to set the standard for comprehensive cleanup of the rest of the Lab. 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 nuclear weapons programs that caused the mess to begin with. We believe that taxpayers' money should be diverted to 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. Courtesy of LANL.

We advocate for a modern engineered landfill instead of the "cap and cover" that LANL and DOE plan. 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 reburial of 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 true 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; ARRA Projects- LANL Lessons Learned, Material Disposal Area B (MDA B) Overview, LASO/EPO, 2012. For more information, see [www.nukewatch.org/area-c/](http://www.nukewatch.org/area-c/)

Stay tuned for the date and location of NMED's Area C cleanup public hearing at [www.nukewatch.org](http://www.nukewatch.org)