

Scottish CND

From: Greg Mello [gmello@lasg.org]
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To: lasg@lists.riseup.net
Subject: [Los Alamos Study Group] Los Alamos: The end of an era (Action Alert #42)

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**The good news: The House Appropriations Committee demands a “dramatically smaller” nuclear stockpile
 pported by a smaller nuclear weapons complex.**

The bad news: Is Los Alamos focusing its mission on plutonium bomb core (“pit”) manufacturing?

Is this bad news after all?

**Informal coalition opposing nuclear weapons growing; new volunteer and staff positions opening; upcomin
 ents (see tomorrow’s email, #43)**

is action alert isn’t really about action. The action components, those listed in item 4. above, will be sent in a
 cond alert, probably tomorrow. The goal of the present alert is to provide a sketch – and that’s all it is – of some of
 e context for current events affecting the future of Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL).

**Good news! The House Appropriations Committee demands a “dramatically smaller” nuclear stockpile
 pported by a smaller nuclear weapons complex.**

st week, the House Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittee completed its markup of the Department of
 ergy’s (DOE’s) proposed FY06 nuclear weapons budget. This week, the full House Appropriations Committee
 leased the Report accompanying its markup, which arrived in our office today. A summary will be posted tomorro
<http://www.lasg.org>.

verall, the committee proposes a 5% cut in nuclear weapons spending for FY06, or roughly 8% in inflation-correcte
 llars.

is is only part of the good news, however. The Committee more or less demands that the DOE and its nuclear
 eapons agency, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), implement a “new nuclear weapons
 radigm” that results in a “dramatically smaller nuclear weapons stockpile in the near future.” The Committee
 aches deep into NNSA’s nuclear weapons programs to make sure this happens, and demands that NNSA replace th
 rrent nuclear weapons complex of labs and production plants, which it calls a “large, expensive Cold War relic,”
 th a “smaller, more efficient, modern complex.” “Smaller” is a step in the right direction; “more efficient” is not.

is is not the place to summarize or analyze the Committee’s work in detail. In any case it will be reconciled with a
 rresponding markup from Senator Domenici’s Energy and Water Subcommittee, so the House views are still far
 om being law. But there is little doubt the report expresses the views of many active House members, not just
 mbers of its Energy and Water Subcommittee or just those of its chairman David Hobson (R-OH).

hile generally supporting the idea of pit production and “the expanding TA-55 pit production capacity at the Los
 amos National Laboratory” in particular, the Committee recommends no funding for the Modern Pit Facility (MPF
 SA’s proposed 125 - 450 pit/year factory. It also recommends no funding for the proposed Chemistry and
 etallurgy Research Facility Replacement (CMRR) Facility at LANL, a new plutonium facility expected to cost up t
 75 million, now in final design. The Committee believes this facility is premature, and reading between the lines,
 tes that the “production capabilities” proposed in the CMRR may or may not be at LANL – or if at LANL, in the

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oposed CMRR as it is now conceived.

The Committee also directs DOE to rapidly undertake a critical review of the true costs of its on-site nuclear waste disposal operations – including those at Area G at Los Alamos.

Bad news: Is Los Alamos focusing its mission on plutonium bomb core (“pit”) manufacturing?

Despite the careful caveat noted above in the House Appropriations markup as regards the CMRR, a number of new and enduring factors make it likely that LANL’s mission will change significantly toward manufacturing of plutonium pits and certain other nuclear weapon components (e.g. detonators, a mission already resident).

If this happens, it means a relative de-emphasis on “science” – including “science-based stockpile stewardship,” which the House Appropriations Committee, to pick one important actor, regards as rather a failure. Congress appears to be moving toward a new paradigm for funding the nuclear weapons complex. House appropriators call it the “Sustainable Stockpile Initiative” (SSI). No matter what it is called, the new approach will likely pivot to a greater or lesser degree around the “Reliable Replacement Warhead” (RRW). RRW is a funded program to produce new warhead designs.

LANL, the RRW program has already been given pre-production money (in the “Pit Manufacturing Capability” budget line). Production is expected to begin in about 2012.

More could be said about the RRW and somewhat more about the brand-new House-proposed SSI, but both are still new and evolving. What is certain, however, is that Congress is settling into a new nuclear weapons pragmatism. Whatever else specific members of Congress may want, as a body they want more deliverables, more accountability, milestones, efficiency, better security, and an end to the scandals.

The details of the likely transition to more pit production at LANL are complicated and have been evolving rapidly since late last year. There are a variety of forces behind this possible shift. In regrettably vague terms, here are some of them.

- Key members of the House think nuclear weapons are not all that useful, at least relative to other expenditures, especially in quantity. Representative Hobson has openly said as much, but he is not alone. A useful barometer of this overall mood is the level of nuclear weapons spending appropriated. This year, for the first time in a decade, there is a slight inflation-corrected decline in “Weapons Activities” spending, accompanied by a legal requirement to study ways to eliminate redundant, insecure, and outsized facilities and programs. As noted above, last week the House proposed an 8% real cut for next year.
- Although implementation lags, the DOE wants to consolidate nuclear materials in fewer and more secure facilities in order to lower their rapidly-increasing security costs and meet newly-recognized threats. Today (5/19) the Project on Government Oversight (POGO) released yet another report on the (in)security of the weapons complex (See <http://www.pogo.org/p/homeland/ho-050301-consolidation.html>) and the huge savings (according to POGO, about \$1 billion/year) that could be realized if nuclear materials were consolidated.
- Current “conventional” weapons commitments by the Pentagon are anticipated to cost a lot of money (between one and two trillion dollars!), far more than is likely to be available. Nuclear weapons compete directly or indirectly with “conventional” military expenses.
- More than this, the annual federal budget deficit is very large. Most of our new debt is being purchased by foreign creditors. The dollar is weak, oil prices high and heading higher. These and other factors are producing serious economic and political concerns and constraining policy options across the board. It’s getting dangerous to just print more money.
- There is a widespread perception in Congress, especially in the House, that LANL is a very troubled institution badly in need of a clear, results-oriented (“accountable”) focus – such as pit production. Some members of Congress are asking what LANL’s unique value might be. The answer, unfortunately, may lie in its relatively-remote location.

- The nuclear weapons complex as a whole is understood to be a poorly-managed and wasteful enterprise, ripe for consolidation and refocusing.
- As we are seeing today, there is a desire on the part of many in NNSA and Congress to change the vague and wasteful “stockpile stewardship” paradigm to a more pragmatic, product-oriented program as a means of a) fixing management problems, b) preserving the nuclear stockpile, c) avoiding nuclear testing, d) producing new or modified weapons, e) saving money, or f) all of the above.
- Between now and at least 2021 (if not also after that), LANL has the only operational pit production facility in the U.S., so if any new pits are to be built at all during this period, either for existing weapons, for the RRW, or for the new weapons so strongly desired by the current civilian Pentagon leadership, they will be built at LANL. The RRW, it must be said, is likely to be an enabling program for these new weapons. To be more specific, it is possible, even likely, that the RRW will be a rugged primary that is capable of an earth-penetrating mission. If so, it could provide a way to circumvent congressional reluctance to fund the proposed “Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP) while also providing for the long-term rebuilding and upgrading of existing weapons.
- Key actors at LANL, NNSA, STRATCOM, and elsewhere have long pursued a “small build” approach to novelty and diversity in the stockpile for a variety of reasons. Production of pits and some other components at LANL is a key part of this plan.
- Some liberals in Congress and in the arms control community optimistically hope that a radical increase in pit production capacity at LANL will prevent construction of any (other!) large pit production facility, such as the Modern Pit Facility (MPF).
- LANL has now under final design a new production-oriented plutonium facility, the CMRR mentioned above, which is to have a 6 metric ton vault for plutonium and/or highly-enriched uranium. This, if built, would triple the existing vault capacity at TA-55, LANL’s plutonium-oriented technical area. House appropriators propose to halt funding for this facility, but their voice is not the only one. There are also senators Domenici and Bingaman and the rest of the New Mexico delegation.
- LANL has an on-site nuclear waste disposal site (TA-54, Area G) which requires no shipments by public highway, involves no external regulation, permit, or commitment to remediate; and is indefinitely expandable at LANL both within TA-54 and at TA-67.
- New Mexico is a politically-compliant and dependent state in which nuclear weapons are, after oil and gas extraction, the largest industry in dollar terms. New Mexico now has a Governor ambitious for higher national office who has proven unwilling to make political sacrifices to fight NNSA and its contractors, who are also large political donors.
- Competing the LANL contract – the request for proposals (RFP) was released today – has given NNSA a process to require (and substantially reward) a deeper commitment to (and capability for) pit manufacturing than UC has historically provided.
- The technical and political risk of any “MPF-only” strategy for making pits has made expanded pit production at LANL a key priority since the late 1990s – and sporadically even prior to that time, since 1989 when Rocky Flats closed.

me of the recent indications LANL’s mission might be about to change include:

- Denial late last year of some funding for the MPF in favor of increased funding (\$16 million over the request, despite a proposed \$14 million cut by the House) for the CMRR project at LANL, along with a hefty \$181.4 million for pit production and certification activities based at LANL. In-house Study Group analysis suggests that even if the MPF is built, NNSA's investment in that facility will not begin to equal its post-1994 investment in pit production at LANL until some time after 2020, if ever.
- A new congressionally-mandated in-depth review of the entire nuclear weapons complex and

programs (originally due April 30, 2005 and now expected in draft public form circa June 15). The terms of reference for this review are at http://www.seab.energy.gov/publications/NWCITF_Terms%20.pdf.

- Frank comments by Senator Domenici on April 18 objecting to this report's proposal to, as he put it, "focus" LANL's mission on pit production and other weapons manufacturing.
- The sudden internal announcement by NNSA headquarters staff to the NNSA Los Alamos Site Office (LASO) on April 28, announced publicly on May 3, that reversed prior policy and committed NNSA to write a new LANL Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement (SWEIS). The reason stated was that LANL's mission would be changing – specifically, because LANL's proposed rate of pit production would be doubling from the most recent levels proposed (i.e. from 20 to 40 pits/yr).
- Increasing endorsement of "small builds" in a number of official sources, including testimony by NNSA Administrator Linton Brooks on April 4 to the Senate Armed Services Strategic Forces Subcommittee.

There are other indications as well, but the above list, sent to you without active hyperlinks, will have to do for now. By the weekend some of the background documents involved should be posted at <http://www.lasg.org>. The situation is rapidly evolving and we will try to keep you abreast of events.

Is this bad news after all?

It is really an emergency – a crisis and an opportunity. New Mexicans have defeated proposals to increase plutonium pit manufacturing twice before, and we can defeat this proposal now, whether or not it comes openly, wrapped in a bow, as it were.

What would victory look like? The status quo at LANL, with a large pit factory in the works somewhere else? (More likely this would be the Savannah River Site in South Carolina.)

That isn't the goal for most of us. We aren't gearing up for a NIMBY battle merely, and neither are the people we've spoken to in recent meetings. We at the Study Group and the more than 110 organizations now loosely working with us seek to stigmatize and defeat nuclear weapons per se: to defeat what these weapons stand for, and to restore what they are taking from us.

New Mexico, no environmental protection program, no social justice initiative, no human or constitutional rights project, even no fiscal or tax reform project can go very far as long as nuclear weapons are accepted by our political leadership. Why? To succeed, all such initiatives require a politics based on mutual responsibility, on the dignity of human beings and the protection of the living landscape – a politics, in other words, oriented towards the protection of life and not towards mass murder on demand.

Most New Mexicans long for a much better educational system, universal health care, much better mass transit, just to name three initiatives which are either economically or politically incompatible with a commitment to nuclear weapons. To the degree we fail to replace a bogus "national security" with real human security, New Mexico will continue to remain poor and without meaningful economic opportunity for a significant fraction of its citizens. As long as nuclear weapons remain in the catbird seat as the most lucrative industry in urban New Mexico, we can kiss any serious progress in dealing with New Mexico's problems. They will only get worse.

Let's welcome the struggle over pit production. We didn't choose it, that's for sure, but it has come to us and if we talk about each other, the planet, and all that's holy it's our duty to oppose it.

This pit production scheme recapitulates and encapsulates the entire nuclear project – the "original child bomb," in Thomas Merton's words. This time, we can choose to reject it.

"No one knows your name," said Rumi, "until you draw your last breath." In the same way, the meaning of history isn't final, but rather subject to our own collective actions today. New Mexico may have said "yes" to the bomb in Act I, and lived with the consequences in Acts II and III, but the play isn't over and all may yet be set right.

...xty years ago, two bombs built at Los Alamos killed more than 210,000 people, inaugurating an era of terror in which we still find ourselves, and all that human beings strive toward, suspended over an abyss. Today, the sheerupidity and immorality of nuclear weapons, expressed directly and indirectly in a thousand ways, are blocking every avenue for producing plutonium pits except one. The chosen site happens to be in our back yard.

reg Mello, for the Study Group staff, board, and volunteers

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