

Friday, September 21, 2007

Last modified Wednesday, September 19, 2007 11:53 AM MDT

Budget action taking shape

ROGER SNODGRASS Monitor Assistant Editor

New Mexico's U.S. senators both see the range of possibilities for the LANL budget to be narrowing slightly, two weeks into their fall work calendar. In an interview with New Mexico radio reporters Tuesday, Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., said that a continuing resolution was likely, adding that he thought it would extend funding at current levels for a month or more.

Then, an energy and water bill would be folded into an omnibus funding measure that Congress would try to pass "in late October or early November."

There has been uncertainty about whether a continuing resolution to keep the department in business after the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30 would use the House version of the bill, the Senate appropriation committee version, the administration's request or some other arithmetic.

Current levels might enable the laboratory to avoid the deep cuts threatened in the House bill, although a number of policy disagreements would have to be resolved some other way.

Notably, the itemized funding for the Reliable Replacement Warhead program is zeroed out in the House Bill and reduced by a third in the unfinished Senate bill.

As he has said before, Bingaman did not rule out cuts.

"I think there'll be cuts," he said. "I don't think they'll be as dramatic or drastic as the House of Representatives has proposed."

A spokesperson for Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., said

his understanding was that the continuing resolution at current levels was not finalized.

"The senator has not gone so far as to say that would be rolled into an omnibus bill for all of '08," noted Domenici's press secretary, Chris Gallegos.

"He (Domenici) is still working to get the Senate to take up their energy and water bill in early October, which would then set the stage for getting a conference agreement out of the Senate and House bills."

He added that with four of the 12 appropriations bills now passed there was still hope that a negotiated agreement between House and Senate conferees would be preferable to an omnibus bill at current levels.