

Plutonium warhead factory under construction near Santa Fe

Despite climate collapse, soaring debt, and crying social needs. Is Santa Fe to be a City of Peace, or City of War?

Twenty-two miles from the Santa Fe Plaza, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) is pursuing a crash program to build a plutonium processing center and nuclear weapons factory at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). Its purpose is to make plutonium warhead cores ("pits") for a new-design warhead for the \$100+ billion, silo-based intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) called "Sentinel."



Nuclear warhead showing pit

Every U.S. nuclear warhead and bomb contains a plutonium pit. Most U.S. pits were made in the 1980s at the Rocky Flats Plant near Denver, where production was halted due to severe safety hazards and environmental contamination. To create the new factory LANL is remodeling its 1970s-vintage plutonium facility while constructing supporting infrastructure on a large scale and hiring thousands of staff and contractors.

It is a huge project. Correcting for inflation, start-up costs will be more than 10 times what was spent in Los Alamos during the Manhattan Project in World War II. If it continues to grow, the new high-hazard mission will transform LANL and dramatically impact the entire region.

Why a crash program? Why at LANL?

In part the answer lies in the web of profits, bonuses, and campaign contributions available in and from a nuclear arms race. For contractors, it's a bonanza. Another part of the answer lies in a perceived "need" to offset declining U.S. global power by growing the U.S. nuclear arsenal beyond its present 3,800 or so warheads and bombs, adding new military capabilities in the process. To do this, new pits are needed. For politicians, helping the new arms race brings political advancement and campaign contributions. Those who question any of this pay a price.

But why at LANL? In 2017 NNSA itself rejected the notion of relying on pit production in LANL's old plutonium facility. New Mexico's senators reacted immediately and forcefully, organizing with other nuclear "hawks" to demand a production mission for LANL despite the many arguments against one. A crash program at LANL appeared to offer a rapid start to the production of pits and hence more warheads.

LANL has failed four times already in its attempts to build a pit factory. By ordinary business standards, the enormous cost overrun (from \$3 billion in 2018 to roughly \$20 billion today) and schedule delay (from finishing in "2026" to "2032" today), would mark this effort as a failure also – and a warning of more serious problems to come.



LASG billboard on I-25 near Bernalillo

LANL pit production has nothing to do with maintaining existing U.S. weapons. It's a crash program for adding new warheads to America's doomsday arsenal.

Pits are radioactive and they age, albeit very slowly. After a few more decades, pit aging could make warheads unreliable, were existing pits not replaced. But replacing pits and maintaining existing deployments has nothing to do with LANL's new pit mission. LANL's new pits, if production ever gets off the ground, are to augment the total number of very accurate warheads available for U.S. ICBMs, allowing more targets to be attacked in Russia and China.

Did You Know?

- Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) is building a factory for plutonium nuclear weapons cores ("pits").
- It is the costliest project in the history of New Mexico.
- New pits aren't needed for any U.S. nuclear weapon.
- LANL's old facilities don't meet federal safety standards.
- A new, safer pit factory is being built in South Carolina.
- The LANL factory would have huge regional impacts.

Without LANL pit production no entirely new warheads could be produced until at least 2036, plenty soon enough to maintain the existing arsenal if so decided then.

LANL pit production: unnecessary, unsafe, unreliable, dirty, unjust

By the time new pits would actually be "needed," LANL's plutonium building and other facilities needed for the mission will themselves have "aged out." Meanwhile all parties in government understand that LANL's capacity is too small by itself to support more than a fraction of today's arsenal, even if it could be made reliable and safe. So a second, larger, and more permanent pit factory is also underway in South Carolina (SC).

There, NNSA is remodeling a partially-built plutonium facility at the 310-square mile Savannah River Site, ten times as far away from surrounding communities as LANL's is. That SC facility is large enough to make all the pits required by law, without building any pits at LANL — or any pits at all for another decade.

The Savannah River facility is not located, as LANL's is, adjacent to powerful earthquake faults and sacred Indian lands.

Pit production generates transuranic nuclear waste, which slows removal of Cold War waste from LANL, and may prevent important LANL cleanup activities. And, as part of its pit mission, LANL seeks to restart on-site disposal of "low-level" nuclear waste by 2027.

The costliest project in New Mexico history

Construction and startup costs for the LANL factory lie in the \$20 billion range, many times more than initial estimates. Operating costs would run to more than \$1 billion/year. LANL pits would cost roughly an absurd \$100 million each, if LANL ever makes any.

Preparing this factory is the most expensive capital project in the history of New Mexico by far.

This gigantic undertaking already employs more than 2,000 people full-time, plus hundreds of subcontract workers. When and if it starts, pit production would be a 24/7 endeavor, because the LANL facilities are so crowded. LANL predicts it will need about 4,100 workers for its pit production mission.

Many safety issues remain unresolved. LANL's plutonium building does not have a fire alarm system that meets even ordinary commercial fire codes. Neither does it have an earthquake-proof source of water for fire suppression. Since there is no external safety regulation, situations like these persist for decades on end. Recently, NNSA reneged on upgrading the ventilation system at LANL's plutonium facility to one that would help protect the nearby public in the event of a major accident.

Will plutonium jobs benefit the region?

As spending has risen at both of New Mexico's nuclear labs, the relative economic and social performance of New Mexico, as measured by overall child well-being, has fallen to dead last among states. Los Alamos has become rich, with one in seven households having at least a million dollars in assets, while surrounding areas (with the exception of desirable Santa Fe), remain poor.

Yet politicians still "look to the labs" for development. Besides permanent pollution and more than 1,600 federally-documented occupational deaths, what does the region have to show for all the money and talent poured into LANL?

LANL sucks in scarce skilled labor, but produces no useful goods or services. Housing markets are bid up beyond what most people can pay. Scarce resources such as water are consumed. Roads are congested. Taxpayers in LANL's bedroom communities pay for public services for LANL commuters and their families, with negative fiscal impacts.

Each LANL bomb core would cost \$100 million, enough for the salaries of 2,000 entry-level teachers for a year, or thousands of residential solar systems.

LANL has spent \$140 billion in northern New Mexico so far, a vast sum anywhere but especially here. Yet LANL has generated neither shared prosperity nor social development. A few have benefited economically but most have not. As a result, LANL drives regional inequality, with devastating social, economic, and political impacts.

Elected officials consistently overvalue LANL's benefits and fear its political power. Their imaginations are stifled. Responsible social and environmental plans – the antithesis of LANL's core mission – are derailed. LANL's largely-secret, doomsday mission – now more than 80% of its work and growing fast – substitutes for the more humane vocations we need. Too many of our young people are entering LANL's "pipeline" of plutonium workers, to be cannon fodder for dreams of world domination.

All these negative effects are now on steroids, as NNSA seeks to exploit New Mexico's political vulnerability by making Los Alamos into a nuclear production site.



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