

Questions for New Mexicans About Nuclear Weapons

Setting aside for a moment the national and global issues that attend the subject of nuclear weapons, why should anyone in New Mexico care about them? What a horrible subject, most people rightly say! Don't we have far more pressing problems to think about?

It was Trotsky who said, "You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you." Just so, New Mexico's nuclear weapons industry is interested in us – specifically, in our enabling silence, and in our state as a base for its growing operations. Over the past six decades, this industry has exerted a profound influence over our state's evolving economy, polity, society, and culture, with results that now affect each of us. That influence is growing in a number of ways.

Some scholars note that the influence of nuclear weapons facilities on the politics of the states which host them far exceeds what might be expected by the size of these facilities alone. What are we then to make of the fact that nuclear weapons spending now directly accounts for almost 6% of New Mexico's total economy, 20 times more than in any other state?

Since 1981 if not also before, New Mexico has received more net federal funds per capita each year than any other state (except VA in 1983). According to the Tax Foundation, for every dollar we pay in federal taxes New Mexico gets back \$2.37. Such a deal! Or is it?

If it is, why has New Mexico fallen since 1960 to near the bottom of all states in virtually every important social and economic indicator? Might the peculiar mission and nature of the institutions through which so much of this money comes be an important factor? Could our political leaders be affected – through, say, which institutions they protect and build up, and which they allow to languish?

Novelist E. L. Doctorow, writing about the U.S. as a whole, captures our New Mexico predicament: "The bomb first was our weapon. Then it became our diplomacy. Next it became our economy. Now it's become our culture. We've become the people of the bomb."

Well, have we? That is the big question that determines so much about our future in New Mexico. We must answer it, or it will be answered for us.

Nuclear Facilities in New Mexico

There are four nuclear weapons facilities in New Mexico. Three are funded by the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), a quasi-independent agency within the Department of Energy (DOE). The fourth, WIPP, is a DOE-funded nuclear waste disposal site; DOE wants to broaden WIPP's mission to include certain high-level wastes.

Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL)

Contractor: University of California, 9th largest defense contractor in the U.S.

Budget: \$2.22 billion: 73% nuclear weapons; 7% nonproliferation; 6% science; 4% other defense; 4% environmental "cleanup" (half for other DOE/NNSA sites); 3% homeland security & related; 3% energy.

Mission: Design and test nuclear explosives; prototype nuclear explosive devices and manufacture selected components; military & defense sciences; onsite nuclear waste disposal; supporting sciences.

Sandia National Laboratories (SNL)

Contractor: Lockheed-Martin Corp., largest defense contractor in the U.S.

Budget: \$2.22 billion (includes branches in CA, NV, HI): 56% nuclear weapons; 14% other military; 13% secret/unclear; 7% nonproliferation; 10% science, energy, corporate, homeland security, other.

Mission: Weaponizing nuclear bombs and warheads; testing warheads and components and manufacturing selected components; defense, spy, & space hardware and software; supporting science and technology.

NNSA Service Center, Albuquerque

Contractor: no operating site contractor; federal site.

Budget: \$584 million: 55% nuclear weapons; 30% nuclear nonproliferation; 11% other defense; 4% cleanup, science, energy.

Mission: Contract administration; frankly somewhat unclear and evolving.

Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP)

Contractor: Westinghouse TRU Solutions.

Budget: \$183 million.

Mission: Defense transuranic nuclear waste disposal.

A Little Primer on Plutonium and Poverty in New Mexico

Key findings

⇒ For more than two decades, New Mexico has received more net federal spending per capita than any other state, much of it military. Our social and economic well-being relative to other states has declined during this same period; income disparity in New Mexico has grown alarmingly at the same time.

⇒ New Mexico is home to three major nuclear weapons facilities and two major nuclear waste disposal sites. Fully 46% of U.S. nuclear weapons spending now occurs in New Mexico. More may come.

⇒ These nuclear laboratories and related military units influence and sometimes even fund our state's government (including environmental regulation), university research, schools, and nonprofit sector.

⇒ Despite having some 23,000 plutonium weapon cores ("pits") available, including those in 10,400 nuclear weapons, trial production of pits has begun at Los Alamos. This production is slated to increase to 50 pits/year and could increase to 150 pits/year - even more than this if multiple shifts are used.

⇒ Most waste from these operations is being permanently disposed at Los Alamos; some is stored for shipment to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant. Thorough cleanup of old contamination will probably never happen, especially if dumping continues.

⇒ The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), ratified by the U.S. in 1970 and now subscribed to by 188 nations, requires complete nuclear disarmament by the U.S. and other signatories.

⇒ Experience suggests that no major plutonium facility can be built or long operated with impunity in the face of serious community opposition.

A Brief History of Pit Production

The first plutonium atomic bomb core (“pit”) was made at Los Alamos in 1945 and detonated near Alamogordo on July 16. The second core was detonated over Nagasaki, Japan a few days later, destroying the city and 74,000 of its inhabitants.

Los Alamos continued to make all the pits for the U.S. nuclear stockpile, first at Building D (where the Los Alamos Inn is today) and then at DP Site (TA-21), until 1949, when the Hanford site in WA began pit production, supplemented by Rocky Flats in 1952. “Rocky” took over plutonium machining completely in 1965. Los Alamos and Livermore continued to make pits for nuclear testing (and possibly for the stockpile) until 1992.

In 1988 the Department of Energy (DOE) realized that the mounting environmental, safety, and moral protest problems at “Rocky” would doom the plant and issued the first of many plans to replace it. In 1989 “Rocky” closed (partial cleanup is estimated to cost \$12 billion.) Since then, every new plan for a new plant has so far been defeated by citizen protest and intervention.



(Photo of early Israeli pit by Mordechai Vanunu.)

Where We Stand Today

In September 2002 DOE/NNSA issued its notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) for a new pit production facility, called the Modern Pit Facility (MPF), with a proposed capacity of 125-450 pits/year. This facility was estimated to cost \$2-4 billion to build at one of five sites. It was to begin production in 2019. The siting decision was expected in April 2004; as of this writing it is being held up until a plan for the size and composition of the nuclear stockpile is submitted to Congress.

Meanwhile, Los Alamos has begun trial production and is aiming at a capacity of 50 pits/year within a few years. Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory can also make pits if needed.

Many organizations (including ours), along with many Democrats in Congress, have been trying to kill the MPF, with mixed success to date. It has probably been delayed one year so far. The entire NM delegation supports the MPF. Some Democrats are arguing that the Los Alamos pit production capacity should be expanded by as much as threefold to avoid building the MPF.

(Photo of Rocky Flats worker: Robert del Tredici)



To End Nuclear Weapons Production

At least five proposals for a new large-scale pit factory have been advanced by DOE since 1988. Three have been cancelled or withdrawn, and one – the proposal for a 50 pit/year capacity at Los Alamos – was delayed exactly ten years from its original deadline by citizen opposition (led by the Los Alamos Study Group). The fifth proposal is still looming, but in the meantime a sixth proposal (halt opposition in NM and triple the planned production capacity at Los Alamos) has been floated by arms control groups.

Not since the beginning of nuclear resistance has there been so much defeatism in the arms control community and in the major foundations which control the direction of most work in the field. As a result, either of the two Los Alamos pit production plans now has a real chance of success, most likely along with – not instead of – the MPF, and backup capacity at Livermore as well.

It is a moment of truth in which decades of citizen resistance come to renewed focus. New Mexico is now the place of decision, and we are now the ones who must decide.

(Photo by Yosuke Yamahata.)



Is New Mexico's Love Affair with the Atom Linked to Economic and Social Decline?

In 2003, a Fordham University study of the overall social health of each state ranked New Mexico *dead last*. We received an “F” grade from the Fordham researchers in poverty, health insurance coverage, teenage drug abuse, average weekly wages, suicide, and high school completion.

Morgan Quinto Press ranks our education system as the worst in the nation; from 1993 to 2004, their assessment of the relative rank of our health care system fell precipitously from #22 to #49 – concurrent with huge growth in nuclear weapons spending in New Mexico. New Mexico has the second highest rate of poverty – and child poverty – in the nation.

From 1929 to 1960, New Mexico consistently ranked 37th or so among the states in per capita personal income. By 1970, we had fallen to 42nd where we stayed through 1980. By 1990 we had fallen to 48th. Whatever else one might say about them, the economic development programs and policies of New Mexico's last 10 gubernatorial administrations, both Democrat and Republican, just have not been as successful as those in other poor states.

Most ominous for the health of our society and democracy, especially when coupled with both widespread and deep poverty, by 1997 New Mexico had

achieved the third-greatest gap between rich and poor of any state (*Santa Fe New Mexican*, 12/17/97).

Why? The money has been flowing in, lots of it. And we have had the political clout. Senator Domenici is one of the most powerful persons in the U.S. Congress. What has been the fruit of the enormous efforts that he, Senator Anderson before him, and to a lesser extent Senator Bingaman and others, have devoted to the weapons laboratories and military in New Mexico? The result has been, on the whole, very little. Will continued focus and loyalty to the federal nuclear-military complex lift up New Mexicans? Six decades of data suggest not.