

Cleanup Gets Cut, But Los Alamos Gets a New, Expensive Plutonium Facility

Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) is the second largest production site in the U.S. nuclear weapons complex. During its history, the Lab has released hazardous chemical and radioactive contamination to the air, soil, and water. Funding for cleanup at LANL pales in comparison to nuclear weapons programs, and is less than 1% of LANL's total budget, while weapons activities are 66%. In his Fiscal Year 2007 budget request, President Bush slashed soil and water remediation for LANL by \$70 million, in order to fund other priorities. But there is enough money to fund construction of LANL's new advanced plutonium facility, the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement project (CMRR). Official cost estimates for this 400,000 square foot project range up to \$975 million. Given the Department of Energy's long history of cost overruns and use of "design-build", CMRR can easily cost over \$1 billion.

Dubious Need

The CMRR project is replacing the old Chemistry and Metallurgy Research (CMR) building, which was completed in 1952. This 550,000 square foot building houses operations involving radioactive metals, such as highly enriched uranium and plutonium, used in the nuclear weapons production. In the mid-1990's, after the Cold War ended, work at CMR began to support research and production operations of the Stockpile Stewardship Program, a program whose claimed purpose is to guarantee that existing nuclear weapons are reliable.

In 1999, due to the building's age, studies were initiated to decide whether to upgrade or relocate CMR. Due to reported safety, security, and seismic issues, it was decided to relocate CMR to Technical Area 55 (TA-55), the Lab's site for plutonium pit production. The biggest safety issues are what operations have done to the building itself. Two of the eight wings of the old CMR are not used because they are radiologically contaminated. In other words, CMR is so contaminated, it's time to build a new one. Does LANL deserve a new, expensive plutonium facility because they couldn't keep the old one safe and clean?

Shaky Ground

In the late 1990's, a seismic fault was discovered under the old CMR and cautionary upgrades were judged to be cost prohibitive. This is no surprise, since the ground under LANL is laced with fault zones. However, the new CMRR is to be built between two fault zones and on top a layer of fragile volcanic ash. Lab geologic maps indicate that the nearest fault is only some 2,000 feet from the proposed CMRR location. To replace one facility because of seismic concerns with another that also has seismic concerns displays unsound logic.

Current construction technologies may be able to overcome seismic concerns, but at great cost. The Bechtel Corp. is mired in the construction of a new Vitrification Plant at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington State, which will emplace high-level radioactive waste in glass. Because the gravity of seismic concerns were initially overlooked, the cost of this project has risen from \$4.3 billion to \$11 billion and counting. Bechtel has a "design/build" contract to construct this Plant, which is the same type of contract being used to build CMRR. Design/build means that the same contractor designs and builds the facility, which can lead to cutting corners and lack of oversight in the soundness of both



Artist rendering of proposed CMRR project-courtesy LANL

design and construction. DOE has cautioned, “design-build can be used most successfully with projects that have well-defined requirements, are not complex, and have limited risks.” The magnitude, complexity, and inherent risks of CMRR do not satisfy this caution. Bechtel and three partners are due to take over the management of LANL on June 1st. The Vitrification Plant at Hanford needs to be built quickly, but efficiently, in order to satisfy legal cleanup milestones. But the CMRR does not have to be so quickly built because there is no immediate need for this risky facility.

Questionable Need Now

The DOE’s recently announced plans to consolidate the nuclear weapons complex indicate that the CMRR would be fully used for only a short period of time. Once a consolidated plutonium center is operational at a location to be determined, all activities involving large amounts of plutonium at TA-55 and CMRR would be transitioned there. According to this new plan, all activities involving large amounts of plutonium are supposed to end at LANL by 2022. Because the CMRR nuclear facility is due to be completed by 2014 at the earliest, then have its operations transferred by 2022, it is simply not needed. Why spend \$1 billion or more for an expensive facility that will be used to capacity for 8 years or less?

The CMRR is meant to support plutonium pit manufacturing at TA-55. A pit is the primary, or “trigger”, of a nuclear weapon. LANL is the only DOE site in the weapons complex currently able to produce pits and is planning to increase production to 30-50 pits per year. This increased capacity will support the proposed next generation of U.S. nuclear weapons under the so-called Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) program. The decision has not yet been made if and how to proceed with RRW. Logically, CMRR should be put on hold at least until RRW is a well-defined program.

What You Can Do

How does LANL continue to receive increasing funding for nuclear weapons production? Budget decisions are ultimately political decisions. New Mexico Senator Pete Domenici chairs powerful congressional committees that keep funding weapons activities and cutting cleanup.

Please email Senator Domenici at: <http://domenici.senate.gov/contact/contactform.cfm>

Or call 505.988-6511 to request that he cuts funding for CMRR.

For More Information, contact:

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