

Watchdog groups call review at US nuclear lab 'sham' process

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The U.S. government is planning to review the environmental effects of operations at one of the nation's prominent nuclear weapons laboratories, but its notice issued Friday leaves out federal goals to ramp up

production of plutonium cores used in the nation's nuclear arsenal.

The National Nuclear Security Administration said the review—being done to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act—will look at the potential environmental effects of alternatives for operations at Los Alamos National Laboratory for the next 15 years.

That work includes preventing the spread and use of nuclear weapons worldwide and other projects related to national security and global stability, the notice said.

Watchdog groups contend that regardless of the review, the NNSA will march ahead with its production plans for [plutonium](#) cores at Los Alamos.

The northern New Mexico lab—part of the top secret Manhattan Project during World War II and the birthplace of the atomic bomb—is one of two sites tapped for the lucrative mission of manufacturing the plutonium cores. The other is the Savannah River Site in South Carolina.

Democratic members of New Mexico's congressional delegation fought to ensure Los Alamos would be among the benefactors of the billions of dollars and thousands of jobs that will stem from the mission.

The U.S. Energy Department [had set deadlines](#) for 2026 and 2030 for ramping up production of the plutonium cores, but it's unclear whether those will be met given the billions of dollars in infrastructure improvements still needed.

Watchdog groups that have been critical of Los Alamos accused the NNSA of going through the motions rather than taking a hard look at the escalating costs of preparing for production, the future consequences to the federal budget and the potential environmental fallout for

neighboring communities and Native American tribes.

"This is too little too late, a sham process designed to circumvent citizen enforcement of the National Environmental Policy Act," said Jay Coghlan, executive director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico. "The key sentence in NNSA's announcement is that absent any new decisions in the site-wide environmental impact statement, the agency will continue to implement decisions it previously made behind closed doors."

The Los Alamos Study Group, another New Mexico-based organization that monitors lab activities, said there is no indication that NNSA will pause any preparations for the sake of complying with [National Environmental Policy Act](#), which mandates some scrutiny before moving ahead with major federal projects.

The group pointed to more than \$19 billion in new construction and operational costs for Los Alamos' new plutonium core production mission through fiscal year 2033. They say the price tag is expected to grow.

According to planning documents related to the sprawling Los Alamos campus, lab officials have indicated that they need more than 4 million square feet (371,612 square meters) of new construction to bolster one of its main technical areas and the area where the lab's plutonium operations are located. Several thousand new staff members also would be needed.

"This is a completely bogus process in which NNSA seeks to create a veneer of legitimacy and public acceptance for its reckless plans," said Greg Mello, director of the Los Alamos Study Group.

The NNSA noted that it conducted in 2020 a supplemental analysis of a 2008 sitewide environmental impact statement focused on infrastructure

and capability increases needed for the lab to make 30 plutonium cores per year.

Toni Chiri, a spokeswoman with the NNSA's field office in Los Alamos, said it's time for a new review to cover alternative activities to meet what she described as the "full suite" of the lab's mission.

"NNSA looks forward to engaging the public, governments and other stakeholders and receiving their input on the process and outcome," she said in an email.

People have until Oct. 3 to comment on the scope of the planned review.

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