



Comments on the LANL Proposed Chemical and Metallurgical Research Building Replacement Project

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Press Release

Proposed New Facility at Los Alamos Would Increase Cancer Fatalities Compared to the One It Will Replace in Event of Severe Accident or Natural Disaster

Surrounding Communities Could Suffer Serious Plutonium Contamination, Independent Analysis Claims

Government Plan Fails To Adequately Account for Huge Fires Like the One Three Years Ago in New Mexico

Takoma Park, Maryland, July 29, 2003: A new plant designed to research radioactive elements for the U.S. nuclear arsenal is projected to cause many more fatal cancers in the surrounding community in the event of a severe accident or natural catastrophe compared to the existing facility it is to replace, according to an independent analysis of a recent government document.

The document is the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the proposed Chemistry and Metallurgy Research (CMR) Building Replacement Project at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, in New Mexico, prepared by the National Nuclear Security Administration of the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE/NNSA).

“It is simply unacceptable that a spanking new building would create far greater damage in the event of severe accidents than the existing one, even if the new facility will have more [plutonium](#) in it,” said Dr. Arjun Makhijani, president of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (IEER) in Takoma Park, Maryland, which has submitted its analysis to the government in the form of comments on the Draft EIS.

The Draft EIS estimates that most severe consequences for an accident at the existing CMR building would be two cancer deaths in the fifty mile radius around Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). The worst-case estimate for the new facility is more than 80 cancer deaths — forty times more. The document indicates that the new facility would store 30 times more [plutonium](#) than the existing facility — to 6,000 kilograms from 200 kilograms. The principal reason for the increase in damage appears to derive from the proposal to increase plutonium storage.



“In every one of the most serious events, the consequences of an accident at the proposed new facility would be far greater than that at the present facility,” noted Dr. Makhijani.

The CMR Replacement Facility is proposed primarily to create advanced capabilities for analytical chemistry and for materials characterization related to nuclear materials, non-radioactive analogs and other aspects of nuclear weapons programs. The Draft EIS states that the overall risk of cancer in offsite populations would be low because the probability of severe fires and other accidents is low. The net risk is computed by multiplying the accident consequences by the probability of occurrence of an event. For instance, the probability of a severe fire in the main plutonium vault is assumed to be one in a million per year.

“The Energy Department should be looking at ways to reduce plutonium inventory at Los Alamos, not increase it,” said Dr. Makhijani. “The area is just too vulnerable in case of severe fires.”

The IEER analysis points out that the accident and fire scenarios in the Draft EIS make no mention of the immense Cerro Grande Fire in May-June 2000 that nearly engulfed LANL. “That should have been one of the starting points for a sound scientific analysis of severe accident and natural catastrophe estimates,” commented Dr. Makhijani. “The assumed low severe fire frequency indicates that recent real life experience has not been properly factored into the DOE/NNSA analysis.”

Plutonium, a key ingredient in nuclear weapons, is highly carcinogenic. One or two millionths of an ounce in the lung will induce cancer with high probability. When it burns, plutonium turns into fine respirable particles that increase the cancer risk because they can be breathed in more easily.

The IEER analysis notes that the Draft EIS does not discuss the possibility that the Rio Grande near Los Alamos and a considerable downstream area could become severely contaminated with plutonium in the aftermath of the most severe postulated fires and accidents. It also does not discuss the economic and social effects of deposition of a large amount of plutonium on nearby communities or on the State of New Mexico.

“In case of the most severe events, the surrounding communities are at risk of high plutonium contamination,” said Dr. Makhijani. “Such events could make some areas near Los Alamos National Laboratory uninhabitable for the foreseeable future because portions of them could be turned into de facto [low-level radioactive waste](#) dumps. That possibility should be carefully analyzed.”

“This Draft EIS is deficient both scientifically and as regards the alternatives that are considered,” said Dr. Makhijani. “It is also cavalier and misleading in regard to its analysis of environmental justice impacts on Native Americans, including the nearest pueblo of San Ildefonso.”

The IEER analysis of the project recommends that the Final EIS consider an alternative in which no new facility is built and the present inventory of plutonium at the CMR building could be reduced. “Such an alternative would seem to be called for in light of the fact that tens of billions of dollars of research on stockpile stewardship have yet to reveal a single aging-related problem connected to plutonium pits,” said Dr. Makhijani. “The Draft EIS hasn’t demonstrated that a new facility is needed. Rather, this proposal has the strong scent of plutonium pork.”