**Nuclear weapons spending to get boost in NM**

*First new warhead in over 30 years part of national security blueprint*

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Fueled by nuclear weapons programs and new plutonium pits, the Department of Energy’s budget for New Mexico is primed to explode.

The department is planning to spend a whopping $9.4 billion in New Mexico in the 2023 fiscal year, surpassing the entire state government budget.

The figure is included in the president’s proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year, which starts Oct. 1. The DOE spent about $8 billion in New Mexico in the 2022 fiscal year.

More than $1.3 billion will be spent on five nuclear weapons programs being worked on by the state’s national laboratories, according to DOE budget documents. That includes the initial phases of the first new nuclear warhead in more than 30 years.

The Energy Department oversees Los Alamos National Laboratory, Sandia National Laboratories and the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad. Both Sandia and Los Alamos play a role in designing and developing nuclear weapons.

In New Mexico, proposed spending on the [**W93**](javascript:gPage(%22A%22,%22W93%22);) Program would go up from $44 million in 2022 to $212 million next fiscal year.

The new nuclear warhead is expected to be completed in 2040 for about $15 billion, according to the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation. It will be the United States’ first entirely new nuclear warhead or bomb since 1988, according to LANL’s website.

If completed, it will ultimately be placed on U.S. Navy submarines.

Mike Millicent, a spokesman for the National Nuclear Security Administration, said the war-

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head is still in its initial phases of a years-long process.

“In this phase, experts evaluate warhead architectures and available technologies against potential range of desired attributes, draft military characteristics and known constraints,” he said in an email.

He said after the initial phase is completed experts will decide whether to continue moving forward.

“Sandia, our engineering laboratory, will be responsible for development, testing, and production of specialized non-nuclear components and quality assurance and systems engineering of the warhead program,” he said. “Los Alamos, one of our design laboratories, will be responsible for the safety and reliability of the nuclear explosives package.”

Total proposed DOE spending at Sandia is nearly $3 billion in the upcoming fiscal year, which is about $334 million more than the current year. Total spending at Los Alamos is budgeted at nearly $4.6 billion, or about $1.1 billion more than the current fiscal year, according to DOE budget documents.

One of the reasons for Los Alamos’s budget increase is because the laboratory has been tasked with ramping up plutonium pit production. A plutonium pit is a hollowed sphere of plutonium that when compressed by explosives inside a warhead or a bomb causes a nuclear explosion. The first plutonium pits were produced at Los Alamos in 1945 during the Manhattan project, according to LANL’s website.

The labs’ plutonium modernization budget in the upcoming fiscal year would be $1.5 billion, up from a little more than a billion in the current fiscal year.

Plans to build a new warhead and more plutonium pits have alarmed antinuclear weapons advocates.

“I’m old enough that I grew up as a child during the Cold War. We are back in a new nuclear arms race,” said Jay Coghlan, the executive director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico. “And I personally find it disgusting that, some 30 years after the end of the Cold War, we’re back in, arguably, an even more dangerous nuclear arms race than the first one.”

Millicent said the new warhead will ensure safety.

“The [**W93**](javascript:gPage(%22A%22,%22W93%22);) will reduce current overreliance on the (existing warhead) and will allow the U.S. to keep pace with future adversary threats. The [**W93**](javascript:gPage(%22A%22,%22W93%22);) will also incorporate modern technologies to improve safety, security, and flexibility to address future threats and will be designed for ease of manufacturing, maintenance and certification,” he said. “It will also ensure the continued viability of STRATCOM’s operational flexibility and effectiveness as we transition from Ohio-class submarines to a smaller fleet of Columbia-class submarines.”

Laura McGill, the deputy labs director of Nuclear Deterrence and Chief Technology Officer at Sandia, said that nuclear deterrence “underwrites” national security.

“For more than 70 years, Sandia National Laboratories has provided scientific and technical expertise to make it possible for policymakers to make science-based, informed decisions,” she said in a statement. “We work with NNSA to ensure a safe, secure, reliable and effective nuclear deterrent.”

Los Alamos officials said the existing pits in the country’s nuclear arsenal are 40 years old.

Since the end of World War II, Los Alamos has done limited pit production for research purposes. From 2007 to 2011 the lab made pits to replace the plutonium in 31 [**W88**](javascript:gPage(%22A%22,%22W88%22);) warheads, according to Los Alamos’ website.

“We don’t have an immediate concern with aging,” Los Alamos Director Thom Mason said in a prepared statement on LANL’s website. “Up to this point, the plutonium pits in America’s nuclear weapons have been very robust. But the pits we have today were largely manufactured in the 1980s, and we don’t have the predictive ability to say with certainty that our current, 40-year-old pits will be good until any particular date. It’s sort of glass half full, glass half empty; we can’t prove that they will fail, but we also can’t prove that they will work.”

The best way to deal with this dilemma is to build new pits, Mason said.

NNSA tasked Los Alamos’ Plutonium Facility with increasing pit production to 30 per year by 2026.

The Savannah River Site in Georgia has been tasked with making 50 pits per year by 2030 using the same process as Los Alamos, so the pits are identical, according to the website.

While Coghlan said it’s true nuclear weapons development has an economic impact on New Mexico, given the salaries of the thousands of scientists at Los Alamos and Sandia, he remains concerned about the country’s nuclear posture, especially given the tense state of world affairs after Russia invaded Ukraine.

“We’re in a very deep and dangerous situation,” he said. “We’re back in a dangerous nuclear arms race in which the United States plays a very prominent role, not by any means the only role but a very prominent role.”

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