

White House: Put Off LANL Project

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A House-Senate conference committee is pushing back against the Obama administration's decision to indefinitely

delay work on a Los Alamos plutonium laboratory.

The fiscal year 2013 Defense Authorization bill, completed this week and now awaiting final congressional approval, attempts to force the National Nuclear Security Administration to keep the moribund Los Alamos National Laboratory project on life support in the coming year. The bill allocates \$70 million for the work and demands the agency commit

to a plan to have the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement-Nuclear Facility completed by the end of 2026.

In February, the Obama administration submitted a budget request to Congress calling for an indefinite delay in the multibillion dollar project, where plutonium science in support of maintaining U.S. nuclear weapons would be done. In a September letter to the administration,

Senate Armed Services committee chairman Carl Levin, D-Mich., complained that the deferral amounted to a de facto decision to cancel the project. The final House-Senate language is an attempt by Levin and his allies to reverse that decision.

The bill's effect in the 2012-13 fiscal year, which began in 2012, is unclear. It comes amid fierce debate in Washington

over the 2012-13 budget, with no completed appropriations bills specifying how much federal agencies are legally allowed to spend.

Officials at the National Nuclear Security Administration, which will have to figure out what to do amid conflicting congressional signals about the project, did not return calls for comment Wednesday.

The committee action is the latest development in a conflict over the project's rising costs.

In 2007, federal officials estimated it would cost \$800 million to build and be done by 2014. By 2010, the price had risen to an estimated \$3.7 billion to \$5.7 billion, with its estimated completion pushed out to the 2020s.

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Panel Pushes for Plutonium Project at Los Alamos Lab

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The Armed Services bill gives a nod to concerns about the project's rising costs, saying the NNSA has to find a way to build it for \$3.7 billion, the low end of the project's estimated cost. The Armed Services committees also enlist the Pentagon's Naval Facilities Engineering Command to help manage the project in an effort to get its management problems under

control.

Project critics noted that the bill does not say how, in the long run, the federal government will come up with the money to build the project.

"The main question this bill does not answer is 'Where will the money come from?'" said Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group, an Albuquerque group that has sued to try to block the plutonium laboratory's construction.