

# May 1, 2008: ‘How many nuclear weapons are enough?’

**By David Pérez** *The Taos News* Remember the “peace dividend” after the end of the Cold War? Well, the fears of mushroom clouds and radioactive poisoning are still omnipresent and, as in past decades, many New Mexicans are very concerned, among them the denizens of Taos who attended the “Nuclear Bombs in Our Backyard” forum Wednesday (April 23). More than 100 Taoseños heard speakers at the Taos Community Auditorium explain and denounce the Department of Energy’s plans to expand production of plutonium pits for nuclear weapons at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL).

Taos is approximately 50 miles downwind of LANL. Plutonium pits are nuclear triggers, or what initiates a nuclear reaction. The U.S. government has said it needs to make new pits to replace those destroyed in testing — to assure the existing stockpile of nuclear warheads is reliable. What peace activists and many public officials are raising is the fundamental question: Why expand the production of weapons of mass destruction at all? Jay Coghlan, director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico and one of the speakers at the Taos forum, explained under treaties calling for the reduction of nuclear weapons, existing warheads could be decommissioned for testing without the need for replacements.

Another speaker, Española Mayor Joseph Maestas, asked, “How many nuclear weapons are enough?” Since World War II, \$6 trillion has been spent on the “nuclear deterrent,” with a stockpile today of 6,500 warheads. So how did this planned expansion at LANL come about? Briefly, Congress required this January that there be a new nuclear posture review in 2009. The existing mandate was composed in 2001 during the Bush administration. This push is being spearheaded by an entity called the National Nuclear Security Administration. Its goal is to consolidate the process of making nuclear bombs without closing any of the eight active bomb-making sites, according to a Nuclear Watch fact sheet.

Los Alamos is the site of choice for this consolidation and “transformation.” The problem, according to the anti-nuke activists, is that Los Alamos has never been an industrial-scale manufacturing site. So new buildings and infrastructure there will cost taxpayers billions of dollars. The cost to run these new buildings once they are in place? A half a billion dollars a year. LANL officials have said the facility produced 10 plutonium pits last year. Advocates opposed to expanded production say as many as 80 pits a year could be produced in Los Alamos if Bush’s 2001 nuclear policy is implemented. One concern by advocates is the nuclear waste produced. In comments dated March 27 to the Department of Energy (DOE), New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry stated: “Before it looks at new missions or expanding existing mission, the federal government must meet and fund its cleanup commitments to the people of New Mexico. “