Lab begins demolition of Cold War-era buildings

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Walls come down sooner, thanks to Recovery Act funding

Los Alamos, New Mexico, December 1, 2009 — Los Alamos National Laboratory today began full-scale demolition of a Cold War-era complex of buildings that once housed plutonium production and historic, nonweapons research.

“We’re seeing something this morning that has not happened since the late 1940s,” said Isaac “Ike” Richardson, the Lab’s deputy director. “The Los Alamos skyline is starting to change.”

More than 50 guests, including elected officials and representatives from New Mexico's Congressional delegation, watched as two large excavators began tearing away walls of a two-story, 22,000-square-foot former Lab building.

"This is a symbol of times changing and getting better," said New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry, who ceremonially started the demolition with a command on a two-way radio.

The Laboratory was able to accelerate demolition and cleanup of this complex, known as Technical Area 21, thanks to a $212 million award from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. More than 165, 000 square feet of former research, production, and office buildings will be demolished.

"This was the second generation of Lab buildings," said George Rael, manager of Environmental Projects at the Department of Energy's Los Alamos Site Office.

In the fingerlike mesas upon which the Lab and the town site rest, "TA-21 was the pointer finger. Everything was happening here," Rael said.Historic achievements at TA-21 included production of nuclear weapons components used in tests in the Pacific and at the Nevada Test Site, isolation of the first gram of americium-241—later used in smoke detectors, and development of the plutonium heat sources now aboard the Galileo and Cassini space probes.

Rubble from the buildings will be sent to licensed disposal sites. Contaminated rubble will go to sites in Utah or Nevada in approved transportation containers.

Recovery Act funding will also go to cleaning up the Laboratory's first waste disposal pits, used from 1944 through 1948, and the installation of 16 new groundwater monitoring wells.

The work is expected to create or save up to 350 jobs, mostly among small business subcontractors selected to do the cleanup work.

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