

Guv Bill Vs. Candidate Bill Richardson

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Bill Richardson the presidential candidate says the U.S. nuclear weapons budget should be slashed.

Bill Richardson the governor is fighting to prevent cuts to the same program -- which is one of the largest employers in New Mexico.

Gov. Richardson on Tuesday sent a letter to eight members of Congress protesting a proposed 3.2 percent cut in the budget of the National Nuclear Security Administration, which funds work at Sandia and Los Alamos national labs in New Mexico. Together, the two nuclear weapons labs employ 22,000 people, most of them in New Mexico and the majority of them working on nuclear weapons programs.

The threat to cut the labs' budgets, the governor wrote, "would signify cuts to these most important national security resources."

As a Democratic presidential candidate Wednesday in New Hampshire, Richardson issued a defense budget proposal that called for a 53 percent cut in the same NNSA budget. The resulting \$5 billion savings in nuclear weapons spending are part of his plan to cut the defense budget by more than \$57 billion a year.

The nuclear weapons budget cut, Richardson's presidential campaign statement said, "will enhance our credibility as we lead global negotiations to reduce the number of nuclear weapons."

Richardson campaign spokesman Tom Reynolds said the two positions are not in conflict.

"The letter sent from Gov. Richardson's office, urging the Senate and House Appropriations Committee to maintain funding levels at Los Alamos National Laboratory and Sandia National Laboratories, fully complements the proposal to refocus the Pentagon's budget and modernize the military," Reynolds said in a written statement.

Reynolds noted that the letter to Congress encourages spending at the labs for border security, health research and renewable energies. "We wanted lawmakers to realize the importance of retaining the many qualified scientists and workers at the labs no matter what the mission may be in the future," Reynolds said.

With his governor's hat on, Richardson is wading into a bitter fight over Congress' annual Energy and Water Appropriations bill, which funds the labs' nuclear weapons work as well as water and energy projects.

The House wants to cut the nuclear weapons budget, which could cost more than 3,000 lab jobs. The Senate wants to increase the nuclear weapons budget. In his letter, Richardson endorses the Senate's proposed spending level.

When it comes to his presidential campaign, his overall defense-cut plan could pay vital political dividends.

The plan is in large part a spitting image of defense cuts being sought by a political group aiming to play a major role in the Iowa presidential caucuses -- a make-or-break state for the governor's presidential push.

The Iowa Priorities Caucus Project, which is working to turn out 10,000 voters for the January caucuses, is advocating many of the same cuts outlined by Richardson the presidential candidate.

Caucus Project state director Peggy Huppert said Thursday that Richardson's new plan is, at least so far, the "most comprehensive statement from a candidate addressing our issues."

Huppert said she believes presidential politics played a role in Richardson's decision making but added, "I also believe he thinks it's the right thing."

When asked what role politics played in the new defense plan, Reynolds said the plan "is in lock step with Governor Richardson's long record of building fiscally responsible budgets and eliminating waste and duplication."

The Iowa Priorities Caucus Project has become a well-known fixture at Iowa political events this year, traveling around that state to ask all of the presidential hopefuls -- both Republicans and Democrats -- their positions on the defense budget.

The Caucus Project's plan to trim \$60 billion in Pentagon spending is based on a defense proposal by former Reagan administration official Lawrence Korb -- the very proposal that Richardson draws heavily from.

Many parts of Richardson's plan are identical to the Caucus Project's plan for slashing the nation's nuclear stockpile from 10,000 warheads to 1,000 warheads, ending new nuclear-weapons programs, canceling a class of submarines and scrubbing the CV-22 Osprey aircraft program.

The Caucus Project also supports ending the F-22 Raptor fighter jet program, while Richardson is calling for a smaller order of those jets than that the military has called for.

A bloc of 10,000 voters could make up as much as 10 percent of the turnout for the Iowa caucuses, and the Caucus Project plans to endorse a candidate on Nov. 9.

Meanwhile, Richardson's plan to "modernize the military" drew fire Thursday from the New Mexico Republican Party.

The GOP -- in a news release headlined "Alert: Bill Richardson Throws New Mexicans Under the Bus!" -- accused Richardson of trying to put thousands of defense jobs on the chopping block and of pandering to a "far-left national constituency."

Reynolds in a statement said Richardson "continues to be the hardest-working advocate for New Mexico and its residents. His record speaks for itself."

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