

LUXURY FLAT IN LONDON...

U.S. plans radioactive project

The New York Times

MONDAY, JUNE 27, 2005

The Bush administration is planning the government's first production of plutonium 238 - a highly radioactive substance valued as a power source - since the Cold War, stirring debate over the risks and benefits of the deadly material. It is hot enough to melt plastic and so dangerous that a speck can cause cancer.

Federal officials say the program would produce a total of 330 pounds, or 150 kilograms, over 30 years at the Idaho National Laboratory, a sprawling site outside Idaho Falls some 100 miles, or 160 kilometers, to the west and upwind of Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming. The program could cost \$1.5 billion and generate more than 50,000 drums of hazardous and radioactive waste.

Project managers say that most if not all of the new plutonium is intended for secret missions and declined to divulge any details.

"The real reason we're starting production is for national security," Timothy Frazier, head of radioisotope power systems at the Department of Energy, said at the end of a recent interview.

He vigorously denied that any of the classified missions would involve

nuclear arms, satellites or weapons in space.

But the secrecy is adding to unease in Wyoming, where environmentalists are scrutinizing the production plan - made public late Friday - and considering whether to fight it. They say the production effort is a potential threat to nearby ecosystems, including Yellowstone National Park, Grand Teton National Park and the area around Jackson Hole, famous for its billionaires, celebrities and weekend cowboys, including Vice President Dick Cheney.

"It's completely wrapped in the flag," said Mary Woollen-Mitchell, executive director of Keep Yellowstone Nuclear Free, a group based in Jackson Hole. "They absolutely won't let on" about the missions.

Plutonium 238 has no central role in nuclear arms. Instead, it is valued for its steady heat, which can be turned into electricity.

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