

https://www.abqjournal.com/opinion/article_4ccd4b08-1155-434a-8b7f-a3a960c6a115.html

OPINION: National security plays vital role in Albuquerque economic development

By James Tegnalia
Jun 15, 2025



Members of the 58th Special Operations Wing perform part of their mission capabilities at Kirtland AFB, 2019.

U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. J.D. Strong II



In 2024, New Mexico ranked among the top 10 states in Gross Domestic Product growth — a surge fueled not only by energy but by the powerful engine of national security activity centered right here in Albuquerque.

At the heart of this is the Kirtland National Security Complex — a dynamic hub encompassing the U.S. Space Force, the Air Force Research Laboratory, the Department of Energy’s new John A. Gordon Complex and Sandia National Laboratories. Together, these institutions employ nearly 10% of the local workforce, with thousands more supporting their missions through contracted partnerships.

This isn’t just a federal presence — it’s reshaping our economy, our workforce and our future.

The Department of Defense and Department of Energy contribute \$7.4 billion annually to the regional economy — a growing force over the past decade and one of the most powerful, yet often under-recognized, drivers of local economic development. A prime example is the Department of Energy’s John A. Gordon

Complex on Eubank, dedicated in 2022. The \$174 million facility is one of only three national offices overseeing the National Nuclear Security Administration and employs 1,200 people.

Meanwhile, both Sandia National Laboratories and Los Alamos National Laboratory have doubled in size in the last 10 years, driven by renewed investment in nuclear deterrence. Sandia now operates with a \$3.9 billion annual budget and employs approximately 15,000 people, making it a cornerstone of Albuquerque's economic engine.

The Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL) is another major force, employing more than 6,000 government civilians and students, with 80% holding advanced degrees. Add to that 1,000 active-duty military personnel and 6,000 contractors — most of them New Mexico residents — and AFRL's total workforce exceeds 12,500.

These institutions aren't just creating jobs — they're attracting top-tier talent to New Mexico. Together, Sandia and Los Alamos have added over 10,000 highly educated, high-earning STEM professionals to the region. Sandia alone employs around 8,000 STEM graduates, while AFRL and Space Force units contribute another 2,000.

Sandia recruits its talent from every major university in the U.S. However, it employs more graduates from the University of New Mexico than any other college, reinforcing the need for New Mexico's continued investment in STEM and national security education. The university's new Global and National Security Policy Institute is a step in that direction.

Major national security corporations who contract to organizations in the Kirtland complex often move to Albuquerque to be near their sponsors.

Examples include Boeing, Blue Halo and EMCORE (now named Rocket Lab).

Sandia contracts \$350 million of its yearly budget to New Mexico businesses and is expanding this effort. The Air Force and Space Force units similarly contract with local companies.

Sandia also sponsors an entrepreneur program which allows a lab employee to take a two-year sabbatical to create his or her own company. Several companies in Albuquerque received their start through this program.

The Sandia Science and Technology Park, a public-private partnership, was created to host these companies. The park, founded in 1998 to attract companies that support Sandia, the AFRL and the new Space Force, currently houses 40 companies. They employ approximately 2,000 people; when you include activities such as construction and infrastructure, the park has 4,000 employees.

The park has attracted nearly \$500 million in investment and received six major national and international awards adding to the reputation of Albuquerque and New Mexico as a national location for innovation. In recent years, Roadrunner Venture Studio was formed to further help foster companies spinning out of the labs and in June the studio announced a partnership with Silicon Valley venture funds to further juice that process.

Beyond economics, these institutions invest in the fabric of the community. The Kirtland Air Fiesta held at the end of May attracted 30,000 community attendees, showcasing base operations and boosting awareness. The Air Force is considering such an air show every two years. The employee pool on Kirtland alone is 23,000 consumers of housing, goods and services — almost all spent in the local economy. The Kirtland Partnership Committee, the liaison between the base and the community, helped secure funding to rebuild Wherry Elementary and Sandia Elementary schools.

Sandia employees led the community, contributing \$4.7 million to the United Way in 2024. Sandia also contributed \$85,000 for holiday gifts to underserved children and \$1.4 million was donated by Sandia's corporate operator to nonprofits for education, family stability and community leadership.

Federal support can fluctuate, but for over a decade, national security has been one of Albuquerque's most stable and strategic economic drivers — one that continues to grow, innovate and give back.

James Tegnalia was the vice president of Department of Defense Laboratories and is a member of the Albuquerque Journal Community Council.