nuclear watch new mexico

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Unneeded Plutonium Pit Production at Los Alamos For More Than Twice the Price

Even as this country faces a seriously troubled economy, estimated costs for producing new, unneeded plutonium pits are rapidly rising at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). Pits are the atomic "triggers" for today's modern thermonuclear weapons. The National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), the Department of Energy's semi-autonomous nuclear weapons agency, is proposing to revitalize and transform its nuclear weapons complex, for which pit manufacturing is the crucial production mission. NNSA has recently released a "Complex Transformation" plan, which designates LANL as its preferred permanent pit production site at a rate of 50 to 80 pits per year. A key supporting document for the plan estimates that the construction costs for Los Alamos' new plutonium facility, ponderously known as the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement (CMRR) project, are more than double original projections. Without CMRR, the transformation plan estimates that LANL's maximum production capacity will remain limited to 20 pits per year.

In reality, few, if any, plutonium pits need to be produced because:

- As the result of a study that Senator Jeff Bingaman (D.-NM) required at Nuclear Watch New Mexico's request, in November 2006 independent experts concluded that plutonium pits, the critical nuclear weapons components, have reliable lifetimes of a century or more. Prior to that NNSA claimed that pits lasted only 45 to 60 years.

- NNSA's site for final nuclear weapons assembly, the Pantex Plant near Amarillo, TX, stores at least 14,000 pits. Pantex is also sanctioned to "reuse" up to 350 pits per year in ongoing "Life Extension Programs" for existing nuclear weapons now known to be far more reliable than previously thought. The Pantex Plant itself boasts how pit reuse is both far less costly and environmentally damaging.

- NNSA's drive for expanded plutonium pit production has been fueled by its desire for new-design nuclear weapons under the so-called Reliable Replacement Warhead Program. Congress has recently rejected any funding for those new-design nuclear weapons.

- In 2007 LANL produced 10 pits for the W88 warhead, for which NNSA claims that it has no spare pits to tear apart during annual checkups for any defects or corrosion. However, according to the Government Accounting Office, NNSA destructively analyzes only one pit per weapon type per year for stockpile surveillance purposes. By the time LANL manufactured its first pit for the W88 production costs had exceeded $2.3 billion, when they were originally to cost just over $500 million.

- U.S. plutonium pit production sets a bad international example to other countries while we preach they can't have nuclear weapons.

- Finally, Congress recently created a bi-partisan commission to review U.S. nuclear weapons policies and legislated that the incoming president must complete a new "Nuclear Posture Review." NNSA's current transformation plan repeatedly states that it is following the requirements of the Bush Administration's 2002 Nuclear Posture Review, but national nuclear weapons policies are now virtually mandated to change.

The transformation plan's supporting document, the *Independent Business Case Analysis Of Consolidation Options For The Defense Programs SNM And Weapons Production Missions*, states that CMRR's current estimated construction cost ranges from 1.5 to 1.7 billion dollars. However, that is just for NNSA's currently preferred annual production rate of 50 to 80 pits per year. Just a few months ago NNSA was still planning for an annual production rate of more than 80 pits per year, in which case CMRR would cost 2.1 to 2.3 billion dollars. When first proposed as a requested budget line item in FY 2004, NNSA told Congress that CMRR's total construction cost would be $600 million (or $655 million in 2007 dollars).

Moreover, the Business Case estimates that additional costs, such as the planned transfer of Lawrence Livermore Lab's plutonium from California to CMRR, will bring total costs to over 2 billion dollars. When complete a mere eight years from now, the annual cost for LANL's newly constituted plutonium complex, for which CMRR is the keystone, will be $238 million per year. However, this is operational costs alone for the plutonium complex's facilities, and does not include separately designated pit production costs, which are approximately the same per year. Added to this are annual security costs of $45 million. In sum, the total costs for LANL's plutonium pit production will be over a half-billion dollars per year. Finally, Los Alamos's expanded pit production mission could cause the Lab to split up, as the Business Case recommends that pit production "be transferred to an industrial organization from the laboratory as soon as practical."

Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch Executive Director, commented, "CMRR is now being designed for unneeded expanded pit production, but is therefore instead a huge, unnecessary money pit. It wastes scarce resources when other urgent national security priorities cry out to be met, and sets in stone the dangerous lame duck policies of the present administration. NNSA's self-aggrandizing transformation of its nuclear weapons complex, and CMRR in particular, should be stopped until wiser nuclear weapons policies that emphasize nonproliferation are reached. We don't expect to see the current administration address this in next Monday's federal budget, but are hopeful that Congress will."

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Sources: The "Independent Business Case" is available at http://www.complextransformationspeis.com/RM_276%20-%20TechSource%202007a.pdf Relevant cost estimates and the recommendation to transfer pit production to an industrial organization are at pages 7, 8 and B-4. Original 2004 CMRR costs are at http://www.cfo.doe.gov/budget/04budget/content/weapons/rtbf.pdf, page 347. For Pantex's authorization to reuse up to 350 pits per year see http://www.eh.doe.gov/nepa/sa/EIS0225-SA-03/chapter1.pdf, p. 1-6. For GAO citation that only one pit per weapon type is destructively analyzed per year see http://www.gao.gov/archive/1996/rc96100t.pdf, p. 5. The plutonium "Pit Life Study" is available at http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/JASON_ReportPuAging.pdf. For LANL's costs to produce its first W88 pit see http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/PitCosts.pdf

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