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Citizens' Victory! NNSA Decides to Not Expand Plutonium Pit Production at LANL

Santa Fe, NM: For nearly two years the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), the semi-autonomous nuclear weapons agency within the Department of Energy, has been seeking to raise the level of plutonium pit production at the Los Alamos National Laboratory from the presently sanctioned level of 20 pits per year to 50 to 80 pits per year. Plutonium pits are the crucial nuclear cores that “trigger” modern thermonuclear weapons. To meet the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirement for public review of proposed major federal actions NNSA was pushing expanded production through a “Complex Transformation Supplemental Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement” (“CT SPEIS”). More than 100,000 citizens and organizations, including Nuclear Watch New Mexico, submitted comments on the draft.

Yesterday NNSA released a final Complex Transformation SPEIS summary that states:

For plutonium manufacturing and R&D, the Draft SPEIS identified a production capacity of up to 80 pits per year. In the Final SPEIS, NNSA has stated that until completion of a new Nuclear Posture Review in 2009 or later, the net production at Los Alamos would be limited to a maximum of 20 pits per year.

Because of its concern over the present course of U.S. nuclear weapons policies Congress has already required the incoming president to complete a new Nuclear Posture Review. Nuclear Watch's main comment on the Complex Transformation SPEIS was precisely that NNSA had to wait for that new Review before deciding on future plutonium pit production levels. Naturally we are pleased with NNSA's decision to follow our advice.

Up until now NNSA's so-called “Complex Transformation” has been driven by President Bush's 2001 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which was written in advance by a neoconservative think tank, one of whose board members later became the head of NNSA. Amongst other things, Bush's NPR expanded the rationale for potential use of U.S. nuclear weapons and the potential target list from two countries to seven (Iraq and Libya are now presumably off that list). Bush's NPR also called for earth-penetrating and “advanced concept” nuclear weapons, which Congress rejected. The NNSA went on to subsequently propose new-design nuclear weapons, so-called Reliable Replacement Warheads (RRW), which Congress has now decisively rejected for two consecutive years.

Nuclear Watch is applauding the downward trajectory of projected plutonium pit production, which is a result of effective citizen activism leading to Congressional denials of funding. In

2003 NNSA proposed a “Modern Pit Facility” (MPF), capable of producing up to 450 plutonium pits per year, which Nuclear Watch was amongst the first to oppose. Congress eventually rejected it. NNSA then proposed a “Consolidated Plutonium Center” (CPC) capable of producing 125 pits per year, which Congress also rejected.

In November 2006, as the result of a study that Nuclear Watch asked Senator Jeff Bingaman to legislatively require, independent experts concluded that plutonium pits last a century or more. That determination was instrumental in defeating the intertwined proposals for Reliable Replacement Warheads and expanded plutonium pit production. NNSA had planned to begin producing 50 RRW pits per year at LANL by 2012, and then 125 RRW pits per year at its hoped-for Consolidated Plutonium Center.

Nuclear Watch claimed that all along the primary purpose of expanded pit production was to produce new-design nuclear weapons. Now at this late date the departing leadership at NNSA is bowing to the political reality that Congressional rejection of new-design nuclear weapons means that there is no need for expanded plutonium pit production.

Jay Coghlan, Executive Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, commented, “The favorable NNSA decision to not expand plutonium pit production at Los Alamos has profound implications for the Lab’s future. Perhaps now we can have some real hope that it won’t become primarily a bomb factory. This is an opportunity to put LANL solidly on the path of meeting the nation’s critical needs to become energy independent and address global climate change. Money speaks, and so far the Lab’s budget has been two-thirds dedicated to core nuclear weapons programs. The time is long past due to radically change funding priorities at Los Alamos.”

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NNSA’s summary of the Complex Transformation Supplemental Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement is available at

http://www.nnsa.energy.gov/defense_programs/documents/Final_SPEIS_Summary.pdf

The decision to limit plutonium pit production is stated on page S-13.