

THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES

WOULD YOU GIVE \$300 MILLION to a dead project? Congress just did in the FY 2014 budget passed in mid-January. The project is the Uranium Processing Facility (UPF), a fatally flawed project that has cut its scope by two-thirds, quadrupled its pricetag, and pushed the schedule for its completion so far into the distance it really doesn't exist.

The good news is the \$300 million for the UPF is a cut in the budget, albeit a modest one—it's nearly \$46 million less than the UPF was getting in FY 2012.

How the project will spend it is not clear—it was supposed to be used to finish the design of the UPF. But the same Congress that handed this money to the National Nuclear Security Administration also told NNSA to evaluate alternatives, a clear indication that the project is in dire straits.

The need for an alternative is not just about the now \$19 billion pricetag for the UPF (it started out at \$1.5 billion). It's also about the gap—the ever-expanding space between when the current facilities in Building 9212 cross the safe-operations threshold and the new UPF is ready to begin operations.

NNSA has announced a "Red Team," to conduct the evaluation, but since the team leader, Thom Mason, has indicated they will not revisit the fundamental assumptions of the UPF, NNSA is unlikely to provide Congress with a satisfactory plan.

At a Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board hearing in December, 2013, NNSA indicated it was already looking at the gap problem, exploring alternatives. Mason's Red Team will likely be asked to validate whatever NNSA is coming up with. No matter what plan develops, it will only push the UPF further into the future. NNSA has tied itself to a transition from Building 9212 to the UPF in the Y12 Site Wide Environmental Impact Statement Record of Decision; alternatives to moving Building

9212's operations into other existing facilities, or even to upgrading 9212, were dismissed from the EIS analysis despite requests from the public. If NNSA decides to do something else, it will have to prepare another Environmental Impact Statement, a process that will take several years.

HOW LONG DO THEY HAVE?

It's not clear how long Building 9212 can operate safely. Ten years ago, the President of B&W Y12 said it was operating in "run to failure mode." Other officials said it could hardly be operated beyond 2018. In testimony before the Safety Board in December, NNSA officials pledged they would not operate Building 9212 unsafely, but they did not say how they would know when they had passed the threshold. The public noted the threshold has to be discovered in some way short of catastrophic failure. The Safety Board indicated there were ways to assess the lifespan of some of the systems at Y12—"We have data on electrical systems," said one Safety Board official.

PROBLEMS MOVING FORWARD

The UPF's problems are only going to get worse. The longer it takes

to build the facility, the more it will cost, and Congress has made it clear it doesn't have \$19 billion.

As time passes, the need for full-scale bomb production will diminish as the stockpile diminishes. Critics are already asking, "What will the nation really need in 2030—production capacity or dismantlement capacity?"

In the meantime, ambitious Life Extension Programs for the B61 and the W78/88 warheads are being trimmed back or eliminated—they cost too much, the military is not persuaded they enhance capability and reliability, and, in the case of the B61, many NATO countries want them out of Europe altogether.

When the question is put directly—How much should the United States invest in a bomb plant that may not even have a mission by the time it

comes on line?—the answer doesn't bode well for the UPF.

Add this one other interesting fact: in selecting the Supersized UPF over a smaller alternative (10 warheads/year production capacity v. the 80 warheads/year UPF) NNSA said, in writing, that it could meet mission requirements for surveillance and maintenance of the stockpile and

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perform limited life extension with the smaller capacity UPF.

Finally, the word out of Amarillo is that replacement of some limited life components in weapons secondaries can be performed at the Pantex assembly plant, eliminating the cost and risk of shipping the thermonuclear cores to Oak Ridge and back.

The UPF also faces simple human challenges. More than a year ago, NNSA selected a new operating contractor for the combined Y12/Pantex contract. The contract turnover, delayed for more than a year and still unsettled because of challenges to the process by the current (losing) contractor, B&W Y12, will lead to additional changes that will further unsettle plans whenever it happens.

And the UPF Project Management team, which has already proven itself incapable of keeping the project on track and on budget, now has even less incentive to meet budget or schedule commitments—they will all be retired before the first production line fires up in the UPF in 2030.

STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT THE UPF

Congress is right about one thing. It's time to step back and take a long, hard look at this project. They will be even more right if they look down the road twenty years and ask the right question.

The operations needed to maintain the nuclear stockpile in a safe and secure mode while the US pursues its commitment to a world free of nuclear weapons (that's our official policy) can be small-scale and can be performed in existing facilities. Maybe even in a dedicated part of Building 9212—a lot of fixing up can be done for less than \$19 billion.

And in the meantime, the need for expanded dismantlement capacity will only grow more clear. The US currently has a backlog of warheads awaiting dismantlement, and the new START Treaty will be putting more warheads in the queue. If the US reduces its multi-thousand warhead "strategic reserve" as some serious experts recommend, the need for dismantlement capacity will grow even more. The existing dismantlement facilities in Oak Ridge are only about 10 years younger than Building 9212, so they will be reaching the end of their safe operating life within the next decade.

If the US has money to spend on nuclear weapons, it should be spent in a way that aligns with our current policy and is dedicated to projects that meet mission needs when they come on line.

THE UPF

- First proposed in 2005 as a replacement for aging production facilities, the Building 9212 complex, at Y12 in Oak Ridge, TN.
- Original plan included modernized dismantlement operations; current plan calls for full scale production operations only.
- Remains the flagship of the next generation of nuclear weapons production facilities in the US.

LIFE EXTENSION PROGRAM

- Seeks to refurbish and replace aging parts of weapons in the US nuclear stockpile to extend their useful life for 60-80 years.
- Modifications significantly change the military capabilities of the warhead being "LEPped," effectively creating a new nuclear weapon.
- In 2014, the US is performing LEPs on the W-76 Trident warhead; plans for B61 LEPs are undergoing scrutiny; initial studies on W78 LEPs are also beginning.

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

The FY 2015 budget is being prepared right now—the President will present it to Congress in early March. Now is the time to tell your Senators and Representative to cut funding for the UPF—at least until the NNSA can explain what it will spend the money for. It makes no sense at all to continue the design process for a facility that will not be needed by the time it is completed.

Share this Update with friends and encourage them to take action.

Letters to the editor are a relatively easy and important way to get lawmakers' attention, especially if you name them in the letter— "We are looking for Senator _____ to spend our tax dollars wisely, not waste them on a misguided boondoggle."

The UPF will be a priority item when the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability blankets Capitol Hill during DC Days May 18-21. Information will appear on their website:

anuclear.org soon. DC Days is a great citizen advocacy effort, from training to building teams to providing clear and concise fact sheets. And you'll get to know amazing people from around the country who share your commitment to peace.

And you can stay informed and up-to-date by checking in at www.orepa.org on a regular basis.