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Biden's FY 2023 Budget Fuels New Nuclear Arms Race

Santa Fe, NM – The Biden Administration is slow rolling its nuclear weapons budget for the federal fiscal year 2023, which begins October 1, 2022. Top line budget numbers released on March 24 showed that Biden is increasing the National Nuclear Security Administration's (NNSA's) budget category for "Total Weapons Activities" by 7.4% to \$16.5 billion. That may seem like a relatively modest increase, especially given accelerating inflation.

However, huge increases in specific programs have now been disclosed in an obscure budget chart entitled "Comparative Appropriation by Congressional Control FY 2023." These NNSA programs are the tip of the spear in the United States' \$1.7 trillion nuclear weapons "modernization" program. It will rebuild every nuclear warhead in the planned stockpile with new military capabilities; design and manufacture new-design nuclear weapons as well; construct new production plants expected to be operational until the 2080's; and procure at enormous taxpayers' expense new missiles, subs and bombers to deliver these weapons of mass destruction. It is, in short, a program of nuclear weapons forever.

One key program is the expanded production of plutonium "pit" bomb cores, which the Pentagon has described as the #1 modernization problem. Adm. Charles Richard, commander of U.S. Strategic Command, recently testified during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, "We now know that we will not get 80 pits per year by 2030 as is statutorily required and even unlimited money at this point will not buy that back."

But throwing money at expanded pit production is exactly what NNSA is doing, boosting "Plutonium Modernization" from \$1.72 billion requested in FY 2022 to \$2.4 billion in FY 2023 (a 40% increase). Two notable subprogram boosts are:

- "Plutonium Pit Production Project, LANL", \$588 million requested, up from \$350 million requested in FY 2022 (+68%).
- Savannah River Plutonium Processing Facility, \$700 million requested, up from \$475 million requested in FY 2022 (+47%).

The last publicly available cost estimate by NNSA for expanded plutonium pit production was in 2018 for \$43 billion over 30 years. Since then LANL has continued to be plagued with delays, nuclear safety problems and self-described "programmatic challenges." Further, the cost for the Savannah River Plutonium Processing Facility has more than doubled in price to \$11 billion just to repurpose it to pit production from the failed MOX program. If those sunk costs are included that single facility will cost around \$20 billion (in comparison, the new World Trade Center cost around \$4 billion). If typical cost

overruns likely continue, the cost of expanded plutonium pit production will exceed \$60 billion over 30 years.

The irony is that no future pit production is scheduled to maintain the safety and reliability of the existing U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile. Instead, new pits will be for speculative new-design warheads, starting with the new W87-1 intercontinental ballistic missile and W93 sub-launched warheads. Expanded production will inevitably generate more contamination and radioactive wastes with uncertain disposal paths. Moreover, exact replicas of existing pits will not be built. Since pits cannot be full-scale tested under the current international testing moratorium, heavily modified pit designs could actually endanger national security by undermining confidence in nuclear weapons reliability. Or it could pressure the United States to resume nuclear weapons testing, which would have severe proliferation consequences. In either event, new plutonium pit production will help fuel the accelerating nuclear arms race, now brought into stark relief by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

This is particularly true when it comes to the nuclear warheads themselves. As an example, the new-design W93 sub-launched warhead is being boosted to \$240.5 million from \$72 million requested in FY 2022 (a 230% increase). The justification for the W93 is particularly suspect given that the Navy's W76 warhead (the single most common warhead in the stockpile) just completed a major "Life Extension Program." Moreover, the Navy's other warhead, the 450 kiloton W88, is beginning a major "Alteration" that will refresh its conventional high explosives and give it a new arming, fuzing and firing set that, like the W76, will give it significantly higher accuracy (and therefore arguably new military capabilities).

In contrast, nuclear weapons dismantlements are being cut 9% from \$56 million to \$51 million, a mere .3% of NNSA's \$16.5 billion in Total Weapons Activities. There are an estimated 2,000 retired nuclear weapons awaiting dismantlement, which would boost global nonproliferation efforts and save taxpayers long-term security costs. However, the facilities that could dismantle retired nuclear weapons are too busy producing new nuclear weapons to do so.

One piece of good news is that Biden's FY 2023 budget does not fund a new sea-launched cruise missile nuclear warhead that was proposed under Trump's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review. However, Republicans are already charging Biden with being soft on defense before mid-term elections. There is a good chance that Congress will restore the replacement to the sea-launched cruise missile nuclear warhead retired by President Bush Sr. in the early 1990's.

Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch New Mexico Director, commented, "Recent polls show that nearly three-quarters of all Americans are now concerned about potential nuclear war with Russia. Citizens should know that nuclear weapons issues, very much including accidents and serious miscalculations, have never gone away. Biden's budget funds not just so-called "deterrence" but instead programs for nuclear warfighting that no one can win. The U.S. should instead lead the world toward the global nuclear disarmament enshrined in the 1970 NonProliferation Treaty and the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons while developing the needed verification technologies to make the eradication of nuclear weapons possible."

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The Department of Energy budget document “Comparative Appropriation by Congressional Control FY 2023” is available at <https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/fy-23-budget-stat-by-appropriation-annualized-cr.pdf> NNSA budget figures begin at page 5. A more detailed NNSA FY 2023 budget is still yet to come.

Please note that the NNSA budget figures were prepared during a Continuing Resolution that limited FY 2022 budget levels to enacted FY 2021 budget levels. Therefore, in addition to requested FY 2023 funding levels, the chart shows “FY 2022 Annualized CR Final” instead of “FY 2022 Enacted Final.” However, the FY 2022 Omnibus Appropriations Act was passed on March 15, 2022. It generally approved President Biden’s FY 2022 Congressional Budget Request that added to Trump’s already bloated FY 2021 nuclear weapons budget.

FY 2022 budget request figures used in this press release are from the NNSA’s FY 2022 Congressional Budget Request.

This press release is available online at <https://nukewatch.org/bidens-fy-2023-budget-fuels-new-nuclear-arms-race/>