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NNSA Set to Approve New Facilities for Expanded Plutonium Pit Production Without Credible Plans and Required Public Review

Santa Fe, NM – Yesterday, on the 71st anniversary of the destruction of Nagasaki by a plutonium bomb, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) submitted a report to the Senate Armed Services Committee on the National Nuclear Security Administration’s (NNSA’s) plans to expand plutonium pit production at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. NNSA has scheduled a formal “Critical Decision 2” at the end of this coming September to proceed with preliminary design of the upgraded and new facilities necessary to expand plutonium pit production.

The NNSA is a semi-autonomous nuclear weapons agency within the Department of Energy, which has the singular distinction of being the only federal department on the GAO’s High Risk List for wasting taxpayer’s dollars for 25 consecutive years. LANL is NNSA’s so-called “Plutonium Center of Excellence” and the nation’s only site for pit production, but major operations at PF-4, its main plutonium facility, have been stopped since June 2013 because of nuclear criticality safety concerns. In addition, there is no place for LANL to send its radioactive transuranic wastes from plutonium pit production since one of its waste drums ruptured at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in February 2014 and indefinitely closed that multi-billion facility.

Despite all this, funding for NNSA’s nuclear weapons research and production programs is being increased to nearly double the Cold War’s historic average, while nonproliferation, warhead dismantlement and cleanup programs are being cut or held flat. This is in part due to plans to spend at least a trillion dollars over the next 30 years on completely rebuilding U.S. nuclear weapons and producing new missiles, subs and bombers to deliver them. The “modernized” U.S. nuclear force is expected to be operational until at least until 2080, more than a century after the 1970 NonProliferation Treaty’s mandate for global nuclear disarmament.

The GAO’s report found that NNSA’s plans for upgraded and new facilities to expand plutonium pit production to 50-80 pits per year “did not include key performance parameters” and lacked analysis of a full range of alternatives. LANL’s currently approved production level is up to 20 pits per year, sanctioned in a 1996 Stockpile Stewardship and Management Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement that was required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Subsequent NEPA efforts by NNSA to formally approve expanded plutonium pit production at LANL failed, and new efforts to expand plutonium pit production without adequate NEPA coverage could be vulnerable to legal challenge. Additionally, there is no public explanation or justification for the need to expand to 50-80 pits per year other than the nuclear weaponeers saying so. In contrast, independent expert studies have shown that pits have reliable

lifetimes of at least a century (the average age of pits in the stockpile is now around 31 years), and up to 20,000 plutonium pits are already stored at the Pantex Plant near Amarillo, TX.

In 2012, in the face of exploding costs and rising citizen opposition, NNSA cancelled an earlier proposal to build a Walmart-sized “Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement (CMRR) Project-Nuclear Facility” for expanded plutonium pit production. Now, as an alternative, NNSA and LANL seek to raise the administrative limit on plutonium in the CMRR Project’s first phase, the newly constructed Radiological Lab, from an original 8.4 grams to 400 grams; upgrade PF-4, the Lab’s main plutonium facility; and proceed with a “Plutonium Modular Approach project.”

Raising the amount of plutonium in the Rad Lab to 400 grams allows for dramatically increased “materials characterization” and “analytical chemistry” in direct support of expanded plutonium pit production. But it also raises the Rad Lab from a “radiological facility” to a “Hazard Category 3” nuclear facility, which has never been done before. Planned gloveboxes and the existing ventilation system may have to change and the facility’s seismic safety rating re-examined. The Rad Lab was originally constructed and equipped for a total cost of \$400 million, but now up to another \$675 million in equipment is being added. On top of that, re-categorizing the Rad Lab to a Hazard Category 3 facility could cost another \$365 million. In all, the Rad Lab can cost up to \$1.5 billion, while upgrades to PF-4 will cost another billion.

The Plutonium Modular Approach involves building at least two and perhaps three underground “modules” at one billion dollars each or more. The GAO report notes how since NNSA narrowly defined the program requirement as building the modules themselves instead of examining the need for the modules, “there is effectively no project alternative other than the modular approach,” despite DOE’s own orders to complete an analysis of a full range of alternatives.

In all, according to the GAO report, the full CMRR alternative of upgrading the Rad Lab and PF-4 and building at least two modules would cost at least 4 billion dollars, compared to the CMRR’s previous price tag of \$5.8 billion (which was up from \$975 million in 2005), and this is before the usual cost overruns. The GAO report also notes how the CMRR alternative appears cheaper because non-nuclear weapons operations, such as preparing plutonium for NASA’s spacecraft battery packs, have been eliminated. NNSA’s pattern when faced with its own cost overruns is to cut out all but nuclear weapons production, as it did with the Uranium Processing Facility (UPF) near Oak Ridge, TN. When a Defense Department estimate put UPF construction at \$19 billion (up from \$6.5 billion), NNSA eliminated dismantlements and downblending of highly enriched uranium so that it could keep production of thermonuclear components that can kill millions.

Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch Director, commented, “Expanded plutonium pit production at LANL is not needed to maintain stockpile safety and reliability, but instead is a must for nuclear weaponeers who want to give existing weapons new military capabilities through so-called Life Extension Programs. This GAO report is more evidence of how taxpayers’ money could be far better spent than on poorly planned, unnecessary and very expensive expanded plutonium pit production.”

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The GAO report NNSA Needs to Clarify Requirements for Its Plutonium Analysis Project at Los Alamos is available at

http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-16-585?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery

DOE's 25 year status on GAO's High Risk list is documented at

http://www.gao.gov/highrisk/doe_contract_management/why_did_study

For an extensive history of successful citizen activism against plutonium pit production see

<http://nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/Pit-Production-History.pdf>