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Federal Government Meets Watchdogs' Demand for Environmental Review of Expanded Plutonium Pit Production

In a victory for transparency and legal compliance by the government, the U.S. Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) today published a "[Notice of Intent](#)" in the Federal Register to complete environmental reviews on its controversial proposal to expand plutonium "pit" production for new and refurbished nuclear weapons.

The environmental reviews, required by the National Environmental Policy Act, were first demanded in an October 31, 2018 letter by Nuclear Watch New Mexico, Savannah River Site Watch and Tri-Valley Communities Against a Radioactive Environment, to which NNSA did not respond. A second letter sent on May 17, 2019 by attorneys for the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Washington, DC law firm Meyer Glitzenstein & Eubanks LLP yielded quick results.

The June 10 Notice of Intent states that three environmental reviews will be conducted:

NNSA anticipates that it will prepare at least three documents including: a supplement analysis (SA) to the *Final Complex Transformation Supplemental Programmatic EIS* (Complex Transformation SPEIS); a site-specific EIS for the proposal to produce pits at SRS; and site specific documentation for the proposal to authorize expanding pit production at LANL.

The Notice also announces a June 27 public meeting near the Savannah River Site, where concerned citizens can comment on the needed "scope" of the SRS environmental impact statement. In addition to concerns about a nuclear chain reaction in handling plutonium, pit production results in a number of harmful radioactive and chemical waste streams.

Plutonium pits are the radioactive cores or "triggers" of modern thermonuclear weapons. In May 2018, NNSA and the Defense Department announced that production would be expanded to a minimum of 30 pits per year at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) and at least 50 pits per year at the Savannah River Site (SRS) in South Carolina.

NNSA tried in four previous NEPA processes to formally raise the current 20 pits per year production cap but failed each time due to citizen opposition and a lack of clear need. NNSA's current attempt is driven by a requirement in the FY 2015 Defense Authorization Act to demonstrate the capability to produce 80 pits per year by 2030. However, the House Armed Services Committee is currently considering repealing that requirement.

An independent study by the Institute for Defense Analysis, commissioned by the Defense Department, recently concluded that NNSA's plans for expanded plutonium pit production are potentially achievable but "will be extremely challenging," are not possible by 2030, and are at "very high risk" at the Los Alamos Lab. The classified report was delivered to Congress in April.

NNSA's Notice of Intent further states:

Several factors drive the need to produce pits, including: the need to enhance safety features to support a modern deterrent, mitigate against the risk of pit aging, and provide the ability to respond to changes in deterrent requirements resulting from renewed peer competition.

The three public interest groups claim that future pit production aims not to preserve the safety and reliability of the existing nuclear weapons stockpile, but instead primarily promotes speculative new-design nuclear weapons. On aging effects, in 2006 independent experts (JASON) found that pits last at least a century, more than double NNSA's previous claim.

The three groups are sponsoring a public forum in Aiken, SC - near the Savannah River Site - on NNSA's unjustified pit production plans and NEPA requirements. The forum will be held in the Aiken Municipal Building auditorium from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. For more information:

http://www.srswatch.org/uploads/2/7/5/8/27584045/pit_fourm_media_advisory_may_13_2019.pdf

SRS Watch director Tom Clements commented, "We believe our groups' efforts over the past eight months to force NNSA to prepare legally mandated environmental documents for proposed pit production at SRS have yielded a significant victory that affirms the critical importance of public participation in this process. Rushing into a large, complex and costly pit-production project in the shuttered MOX plant, a poorly constructed facility not intended for pit production, echoes NNSA's typical recipe for failure."

Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch New Mexico Director, added, "The Los Alamos Lab has a long track record of nuclear safety problems that must be resolved before expanded plutonium pit production is even considered. The government's claimed need for expanded production needs to be critically examined for its environmental impacts, costs and potentially adverse national security impacts. NNSA's unrealistic and unnecessary plan for expanded plutonium pit production will accelerate the growing nuclear arms race. Concerned citizens should demand clear answers from the government through the public comment process we have just won."

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The June 10, 2019 Federal Register **Notice of Intent To Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for Plutonium Pit Production at the Savannah River Site** is available at

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2019-06-10/pdf/2019-12003.pdf>

The attorneys' letter to NNSA Administrator Lisa E. Gordon-Hagerty is available at

<https://nukewatch.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Summary-Pit-Production.pdf> and

<https://www.trivalleycares.org/new/5-17-19-Letter-Groups-Demand-NEPA-for-Pu-Pit-Production.pdf>

The executive summary Institute for Defense Analysis report on the NNSA's plans for expanded plutonium pit production is available at <https://nukewatch.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/NGOS-demand-NEPA-for-pit-production.pdf>