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NNSA Suppresses How Taxpayers Money Is Spent

Santa Fe, NM – The National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) has just released cursory two or three page summaries of contractors’ performance paid for by the American taxpayer. For the just ended fiscal year 2023, NNSA gave nothing less than grades of “Excellent” or “Very Good” in six broad mission goals for its major contractors. This is despite the constant cost overruns and schedule delays that are the rule, not the exception, in the nationwide nuclear weapons complex. NNSA and its parent Department of Energy have been on the Government Accountability Office’s “High Risk List” for project mismanagement ever since GAO started that List in 1991.

A current example is the Uranium Processing Facility (UPF) at the Y-12 Plant near Oak Ridge, Tennessee, originally estimated in 2011 to cost \$1.4 to \$3.5 billion. After costs started going through the roof, NNSA and Senator Lamar Alexander (R.-TN), then-chair of Senate Energy and Water Appropriations, swore that UPF would never go over \$6.5 billion. But even after eliminating non-nuclear weapons production missions and a formal decision to continue operations at two old, unsafe buildings slated for replacement, the Uranium Processing Facility is now estimated to cost \$8.5 billion. However, even that is not the final price, as NNSA is still to “rebaseline” UPF costs at some unspecified date.

NNSA is so desperate to sink money into the UPF that it is asking for one of the few “anomalies” or exceptions to the Continuing Resolution that will keep the federal government running. This anomaly would allow the agency to spend UPF construction money at a FY 2024 rate of \$760 million instead of being restricted to the FY 2023 budget level of \$362 million. Nevertheless, NNSA gave the Y-12 contractor an overall performance grade of 90%.

Out of approximately 60,000 (and growing) full time employees in NNSA’s nuclear weapons complex, only a little more than 2,000 are federal positions that provide weak oversight while the remainder are all contractor personnel. NNSA’s highest priority, the expanded production of plutonium “pit” bomb cores, is another pertinent example. The Pentagon has called pit production the number one issue in the \$2 trillion “modernization” program that will rebuild every nuclear warhead in the planned stockpile and manufacture new-design nuclear weapons, while also procuring new missiles, subs and bombers to deliver them.

At the same time, NNSA is building new nuclear weapons production plants expected to be operational until the 2080’s. Expanded pit production is NNSA’s most complex and expensive program ever, now costing approximately \$60 billion over the next 25 years. But GAO has reported that NNSA still has no credible cost estimates or an “Integrated Master Schedule” for simultaneous pit production at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in northern New Mexico and the Savannah River Site in South Carolina.

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Nor is NNSA leveling with American taxpayers on what they are paying for. NNSA was publicly releasing the full contractor Performance Evaluation Reports until 2012 when it began releasing only summaries. Nuclear Watch New Mexico sued under the Freedom of Information Act to obtain the full reports, after which NNSA caved in within three working days and began to release them.

But this lasted only until 2019, when NNSA again began releasing only terse summaries. Nuclear Watch sued again and obtained the full FYs 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022 Performance Evaluation Reports. We also forced NNSA to post them in its online FOIA Reading Room since they are “Frequently Requested Documents” as defined by 1996 amendments to the venerable Freedom of Information Act. (This required three separate FOIA requests met by our colleagues at SRS Watch and Tri-Valley CAREs). As a result of our litigation, NNSA has just announced that the full FY 2023 Performance Evaluation Reports will be posted to its online FOIA Reading Room by February 26, 2024, but subject to still-to-be-determined redactions that will likely cloud contractor accountability.

NNSA gave an overall grade of 89% to Triad National Security, the contractor at the Los Alamos Lab, awarding \$48.8 million in pure profit to the limited liability corporation. Of note, NNSA gave Triad an “Excellent” for Goal 1 “Mission Delivery: Nuclear Weapons” and noted that it “Exceeded the expected number of pit builds in FY 2023.” These are practice or “qualifying” plutonium pits leading to eventual “war reserve” pits for the stockpile.

However, under “Issues”, NNSA also reported “Delays in PF-4 [LANL’s pit production facility] work execution schedules due to poor coordination of work activities” and “Out-year infrastructure and production planning did not meet program needs.” This calls into question exactly when and at what price LANL will begin to meet its required level of producing at least 30 plutonium pits per year. Sadly, none of that future production is to maintain the safety and reliability of the existing stockpile. Instead, in a throwback to the Cold War, it is for new nuclear weapons that will enable loading multiple warheads on new intercontinental ballistic missiles, which themselves have undergone massive cost increases.

Jay Coghlan, director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, commented, “NNSA whitewashes contractor performance and suppresses unclassified information on how taxpayer money is spent. It’s crucial that citizens have full and complete information as the world enters a new and more dangerous nuclear arms race fed in part by corporate greed and the profit motive. In the interests of holding contractors accountable, NNSA should release full, unredacted Performance Evaluation Reports.”

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NNSA’s summaries of its FY 2023 Performance Evaluation Reports are available at <https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/nnsa-releases-annual-performance-reviews-management-and-operations-partners-0>

Past Performance Evaluation Reports are available in NNSA’s E-FOIA reading room at <https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/nnsa-frequently-requested-documents> According to NNSA, the redacted FY 2023 Performance Evaluation Reports will also be posted there in late February.

This press release is available online at <https://nukewatch.org/nnsa-suppresses-how-taxpayers-money-is-spent/>

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