nuclear watch new mexico

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Costs Jump in Nuclear Weapons vs. Cleanup; Nuclear Weapons Winning over Environmental Protection

Santa Fe, NM - America is at a crossroads, having to choose between an unnecessarily large, exorbitant, nuclear weapons stockpile, and cleanup that would protect the environment and water resources for future generations. Expanded nuclear weapons research and production, which will cause yet more contamination, is winning.

Two recently released government reports make clear the stark inequality between the so-called modernization program to upgrade and indefinitely preserve U.S. nuclear forces (in large part for a new Cold War with Russia), and the nation-wide program to clean up the radioactive and toxic contamination from the first Cold War. The Obama Administration launched a trillion dollar nuclear weapons "modernization" program, which President Trump may expand. In contrast, cleanup of the first Cold War mess has been cut from a high of $8.5 billion in 2003 to $5.25 billion in 2016, even though comprehensive cleanup would produce far more jobs than nuclear weapons programs.

With respect to cleanup, last week the Congressional Government Accountability Office (GAO) released its bi-annual *High-Risk Series*, which added "Environmental Liabilities" to its list of federal programs and operations that are particularly susceptible to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement. Environmental liabilities are expressed as the estimated taxpayers' cost of necessary future cleanup.

The Department of Energy is running the world's largest cleanup program addressing the massive contamination caused by Cold War nuclear weapons research and production. But that national program is plagued by inefficiencies, mismanagement, cost overruns and excessive contractor profits.

According to GAO, since 1989 DOE's Office of Environmental Management has spent over $164 billion on cleanup. Nevertheless, "Despite billions spent on environmental cleanup, DOE's environmental liability has roughly doubled from a low of $176 billion in fiscal year 1997 to the fiscal year 2016 estimate of $372 billion."

Therefore, from a cost perspective, cleanup is going backwards fast. Moreover, that $372 billion won't be anywhere near the total cost of comprehensive, genuine cleanup because not all contamination is yet known. Furthermore, DOE explicitly plans to "cap and cover" much of its existing buried radioactive and toxic wastes, creating *de facto* permanent nuclear waste dumps while declaring them cleaned up according to regulations.

In contrast, funding is rapidly rising for revamped nuclear weapons and the missiles, submarines and bombers to deliver these most formidable weapons of mass destruction. Underpinning this astronomical expense is the fact that instead of maintaining just the few hundred warheads needed for the publicly claimed policy of "deterrence," thousands of warheads are being refurbished and kept to fight a potential nuclear war. This is the little known but explicit policy

of the U.S. government. As a top-level 2013 Defense Department policy document put it, "The new guidance [in Obama's 2010 Nuclear Posture Review] requires the United States to maintain significant counterforce capabilities against potential adversaries. The new guidance does not rely on a "counter-value' or "minimum deterrence" strategy."

President Reagan said long ago that nobody can win a nuclear war. Thousands of nuclear weapons are certainly not needed to deter emerging nuclear threats such as North Korea or potential nuclear terrorism. In addition, there are increasing hints (for example, by the Defense Department's Defense Science Board) that the U.S. may develop and produce more precise low-yield nuclear weapons that are arguably more usable, and even possibly return to full-scale testing.

Expanded U.S. nuclear capabilities under the rubric of "modernization" involves the wholesale rebuilding of DOE's nuclear weapons production complex; a perpetual cycle of Life Extension Programs that refurbish existing nuclear weapons while giving them new military capabilities; and completely new ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, heavy bombers and submarines to deliver the rebuilt nuclear weapons.

Not surprisingly, that's going to cost American taxpayers more than previously thought. Last week the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) released its updated study *Projected Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2017 to 2026.* It estimated that "modernization" of the U.S. nuclear forces will cost $400 billion during 2017 to 2026. This is 15% higher than a CBO estimate two years ago of $348 billion for the 10-year period of 2015 to 2024.

Moreover, in its earlier report CBO asserted that the next two decades will cost even more. Therefore, modernization will exceed the one trillion dollars over 30 years that is often cited now. And that figure could go much higher yet should Trump accelerate modernization, which he implied when he tweeted the U.S. "must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability..."

Common to both its nuclear weapons and cleanup programs, DOE has the singular distinction of having its contract management designated as high risk by GAO for 26 consecutive years. This is because the Department's track record of inadequate management and oversight of contractors, who comprise 95% of all nuclear weapons complex employees, has left DOE vulnerable to fraud, waste and abuse. The list of busted projects is overwhelming, while the usual nuclear weapons contractors are typically not held accountable (for example, Bechtel's Waste Treatment Plant at Hanford or Babcock and Wilcox's half-billion dollar design mistake for Y-12's proposed Uranium Processing Facility).

To illustrate this nation-wide problem locally, the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), run by Bechtel and the University of California, recently signed a new 2016 Consent Order governing cleanup with the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED), which has coddled the nuclear weapons industry under Gov. Martinez. This new agreement pushes completion of Lab cleanup out to 2040, while creating loopholes where DOE can get out of cleanup by simply claiming that it is too difficult or costly. As a result, DOE has cut the Lab cleanup budget to around $188M per year, in contrast to a high of $225 million in 2014, or the $250 million per year that NMED has said in the past is necessary.

To add insult to injury, LANL's estimated 3-4 billion dollar environmental liability assumes that nearly 200,000 cubic meters of radioactive and hazardous wastes are left behind forever in unlined dumps, protected only by "cap and cover" and thereby "cleaned up" according to regulations. But this, of course, is false cleanup. As a 2005 LANL hydrogeological report put it,

"Future contamination at additional locations [in regional groundwater] is expected over a period of decades to centuries as more of the contaminant inventory reaches the water table."

But nuclear weapon research and production at LANL, which threatens precious water resources, is not only thriving, but is expanding. Currently, up to $6 billion is planned to be spent on upgrading existing plutonium facilities and building new ones so that production can be expanded to 50-80 plutonium pits per year by 2028 (pits are the fissile cores of nuclear weapons). Ironically, expanded pit production is for exorbitant "Interoperable Warheads" for both intercontinental ballistic missiles and sub-launched missiles that the nuclear weapons labs are pushing but the Navy doesn't want. Moreover, the planned changes to the existing, extensively tested nuclear stockpile are so radical that they could undermine confidence in performance reliability, possibly prompting a return to full scale testing.

Scott Kovac, Research Director at Nuclear Watch NM, commented, "Ten years from now, after taxpayers spend another $50 billion on cleanup, DOE's environmental liability estimate will probably still be more than $400 billion. Meanwhile the US will have spent the same amount on expanded nuclear weapons production that will cause yet more contamination. That money should instead be used to get cleanup done once and for all, giving American taxpayers the real national security of a clean environment and safe drinking water."

Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch New Mexico Executive Director, observed, "Over the next few decades the window will close for comprehensive, genuine cleanup. Unfortunately, our children and grandchildren will instead be saddled with the ongoing financial and environmental debts of never-ending improvements to nuclear weapons that keep a privileged elite rich. As citizens we need deep and meaningful contractor reform and stronger federal oversight. The directors of the nuclear weapons labs should be stripped of their two-hatted role as the presidents of the for-profit limited liability corporations that run the labs, which are built-in conflicts-of-interest. Then perhaps we would begin to see jobs-creating cleanup programs taking precedence over unneeded, exorbitant nuclear weapons programs that threaten global security and local environments."

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GAO High-Risk Series 2017 is available at http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-17-317
Specific DOE cleanup cost numbers are at
http://gao.gov/highrisk/us_government_environmental_liability/why_did_study#t=1

Projected Costs Of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2017 To 2026 February 2017 is available at
https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/115th-congress-2017-2018/reports/52401-nuclearcosts.pdf

The quote on top-level counterforce nuclear weapons doctrine is from
Report on Nuclear Implementation Strategy of the United States Specified in Section 491 of 10. U.S.C. Department of Defense, June 2013, page 4 (quotation marks in the original)
http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/us-nuclear-employment-strategy.pdf

For possible more usable nuclear weapons and a return to full-scale testing, see *Seven Defense Priorities for the New Administration*, Defense Science Board, December 2016,
http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/Seven_Defense_Priorities.pdf

The quote on more expected groundwater contamination is from LANL's Hydrogeologic Studies of the Pajarito Plateau: A Synthesis of Hydrogeologic Workplan Activities (1998–2004), ER2005-0679 December 2005, Page 5-15, http://www.worldcat.org/title/los-alamos-national-laboratorys-hydrogeologic-studies-of-the-pajarito-plateau-a-synthesis-of-hydrogeologic-workplan-activities-1998-2004/oclc/316318363