nuclear watch new mexico

NNSA Releases New Plutonium Life Study
Key Finding: Plutonium Aging Not Affecting Existing Nuclear Weapons

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Santa Fe, NM – In response to Freedom of Information Act requests, the Department of Energy's semi-autonomous National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) has released a new study entitled *Plutonium Aging: Executive Summary (Unclassified)* by long-time scientific advisors to the U.S. government called the JASONs. The key "High-Level Finding" of this new report is:

> "The Pu [plutonium] in the stockpile appears to be aging slowly. The degradation issues that have been observed do not call into question present weapons performance."

Plutonium "pits" are the all-important radioactive cores or "triggers" of nuclear weapons. The NNSA has repeatedly claimed that potential aging effects drive the need for the aggressive expansion of plutonium pit production, which is the agency's most expensive and complex program ever. The Pentagon has stated that expanded pit production is one of the most critical issues in its $2 trillion "modernization" program to keep nuclear weapons forever.

However, the independent Government Accountability Office (GAO) has repeatedly stated that the NNSA has no credible costs estimates and no "Integrated Master Schedule" for simultaneous production at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) in northern New Mexico and the Savannah River Site (SRS) in South Carolina. In fact, DOE and NNSA have been on the GAO's "High Risk List" for project mismanagement and waste of taxpayers' dollars since 1991. At more than $30 billion, the plutonium pit plant at SRS is on track to become the most expensive building in U.S. history. A comparable amount will be spent at LANL on facility upgrades and related projects, for which the NNSA fails to keep total aggregated costs.

The new pit life study does recommend NNSA "establishing pit production capabilities that may be needed to provide options to mitigate any future aging-related issues." As background, the first JASON pit life study in 2006 found that most pit types have reliable lifetimes of 100 years, and those that don't have relatively easy fixes (the average age of existing pits is around 43). The new JASON pit life study demonstrates that there has been little, if any, change since 2006.

In 2019 the JASONs were asked by Congress to complete a new pit life study. However, in their "Letter Report" they explicitly stated that they were not given enough time to do a full study and listed the criteria whereby one should be done. The JASONs also recommended that "pit manufacturing be re-established as expeditiously as possible in parallel with the focused program to understand Pu aging…", which the LANL Director has cited as programmatic justification. Now that a new, full study has been completed, "*may* be needed" and "*any* future aging-related issues" is hardly a ringing endorsement of expanded production.

Crucially, no future pit production is to maintain the safety and reliability of the existing stockpile. Instead, it is all for new-design nuclear weapons for the new arms race. These new

weapons can't be tested because of the existing global testing moratorium, thereby perhaps degrading confidence in the stockpile. Or new-design nuclear weapons testing could prompt the U.S. to resume testing, which would have severe international proliferation consequences.

To illustrate NNSA's claimed importance of the plutonium aging issue, the agency stated in its January 2026 draft Pit Production Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS):

> "NNSA's existing pit manufacturing capability is insufficient to meet current production requirements, necessitating the establishment of additional pit production capability and capacity both to satisfy the congressional mandate and to mitigate risks associated with plutonium aging." Summary, page 2.
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> [While rejecting the reuse of more than 15,000 existing pits] "Only Reuse Existing Pits. Not feasible as sole solution. Stockpiled pits age and do not mitigate aging risks or enable enhanced safety features..." Summary, page 14.
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> "Many of the aging pits will have to be replaced with new ones in the coming years to maintain a safe and reliable nuclear stockpile and deterrence." Volume 1, page 3

In 2021, LANL Director Thom Mason declared:

> "... the pits we have today were largely manufactured in the 1980s, and we don't have the predictive ability to say with certainty that our current, 40-year-old pits will be good until any particular date. It's sort of glass half full, glass half empty; we can't prove that they will fail, but we also can't prove that they will work." **The best way to deal with this dilemma is to "take it off the table," Mason explains. "We do that by making new pits, immediately."** [1]

Jay Coghlan, Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, commented,

> "The Lab Director certainly must be pleased that LANL is going to spend 2 billion taxpayer dollars on new plutonium pit production for each of the next six years. But it looks like his plutonium aging excuse doesn't really hold water. LANL's nuclear weapons programs are getting a huge $1 billion raise on October 1 for a total of $6 billion in FY 2027, while virtually everything else is being cut. We need real national security against wildfires, pandemics and adverse climate change, not empty excuses for new-design nuclear weapons for the new arms race that threatens us all."

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The new JASON pit life study *Plutonium Aging: Executive Summary (Unclassified)* is available at https://nukewatch.org/2026-jason-plutonium-aging-executive-summary/

The 2006 JASON pit life study is available at https://nukewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/pit.pdf

The 2019 JASON Letter Report is available at https://irp.fas.org/agency/dod/jason/pit-aging.pdf

NNSA's draft Pit Production PEIS is available at https://www.energy.gov/nepa/articles/doeeis-0573-draft-environmental-impact-statement-april-2026

This press release is available at https://nukewatch.org/nnsa-releases-new-plutonium-life-study/

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[1] *Pit production explained*, LANL, December 21, 2021, https://www.lanl.gov/media/publications/national-security-science/1221-pit-production-explained (Bolded emphasis added.)