125 National, Community Groups Join the Snake River Alliance to Urge Congress to Stop Dangerous, Costly U.S. Plutonium Bomb Trigger Factory

More than one hundred national grassroots organizations that monitor the U.S. nuclear weapons complex, including the Snake River Alliance, have called on Congress to block Department of Energy (DOE) plans to construct a major new plant to manufacture plutonium triggers—known as “pits”—for the nation’s nuclear arsenal.

A letter from the groups delivered today to members of Senate and House policy and appropriations committees concludes that a Modern Pit Facility (MPF) would, “waste billions of taxpayer dollars, threaten global nuclear non-proliferation efforts and create further environmental contamination and health risks for workers and community members.”

The letter was initiated by the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability, a network of groups from communities located near U.S. nuclear weapons sites. Other signers included the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Union of Concerned Scientists, Council for a Livable World, Friends of the Earth, and Greenpeace International.

The proposed plant could produce in excess of 500 plutonium pits per year, a level the letter said was “simply not needed given the recently ratified Moscow Treaty” which limits deployed U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons to 2,200 by 2013. According to the DOE, the MPF will cost between $2 billion and $4 billion to construct and $300 million per year to operate, money the signers say “might otherwise be devoted to cleaning up the Cold War legacy of environmental contamination from the nuclear weapons complex.” The cost to properly clean up the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory (INEEL), for example, is estimated to exceed $20 billion.

The signers also contend the MPF will pose significant risks to public health and the environment. A preliminary DOE analysis indicates normal operations will cause several cancer deaths among its workers. The previous U.S. plutonium pit manufacturing plant at Rocky Flats, Colorado was closed after the discovery of severe radioactive contamination throughout the facility.

“Spending billions on a new bomb trigger facility will take away badly needed funding for cleanup at sites such as INEEL,” said Jeremy Maxand, Snake River Alliance executive director. “Much of the 750,000 barrels, boxes and crates of radioactive waste buried above the Snake River Aquifer came from DOE’s first nuclear trigger plant at Rocky Flatts, and that mess has yet to be cleaned up.”

In addition, the letter to Congress expressed concern that, “[T]he U.S. will also signal to the rest of the world that it is walking away from its commitment under Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty to continue taking steps toward nuclear disarmament” by producing more plutonium bomb triggers.

Public concerns may be expressed in writing by sending them before August 5, 2003, to Mr. Jay Rose, U.S. Department of Energy, 1000 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20585; fax (202) 586-5324; email James.Rose@nnsa.doe.gov.

(Letter to Congress attached)

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Contact: Jeremy Maxand
(208) 344-9161 (days)
(208) 850-9334 (eves)
Dear Senator/Representative:

We are writing to urge you to oppose the Department of Energy's (DOE) plans to build a Modern Pit Facility (MPF) to produce new plutonium triggers for the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal.

There is no need for such a facility. It will waste billions of taxpayer dollars, threaten global nuclear non-proliferation efforts and create further environmental contamination and health risks for workers and community members.

The DOE's Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) states that the need for the MPF is based on classified analyses of long-term pit production requirements. Congress and the public should be informed and involved in the debate about the future of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and therefore whether any new pit production capability might be needed.

The DEIS calls for a new facility that could produce in excess of 500 plutonium pits per year. This level of production is simply not needed given the recently ratified Moscow Treaty under which both Russia and the U.S. have pledged to reduce their deployed nuclear weapons to 2,200 or under by 2013.

The DEIS presents no data indicating that pits need to be replaced for any reason. The publicly available data on safety and reliability indicate that there is no scientific basis for asserting that plutonium pits in the current U.S. arsenal need replacement. Hence, the existing facts indicate that there is no safety or reliability requirement even for the capacity of 20 pits per year that will be established at the Los Alamos National Laboratory by 2007, much less the vast expansion that is proposed in the form of the MPF.

The DEIS clearly states that the MPF would have the capability to produce new-design pits for a new generation of U.S. nuclear weapons. We fundamentally oppose any country embarking on the production of additional nuclear weapons. Such production is likely to launch a chain of events that leads to the resumption of explosive nuclear testing in order to evaluate new weapons designs. By planning to produce large numbers of new-design plutonium pits, the U.S. also will signal to the rest of the world that it is walking away from its commitment under Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty to continue taking steps toward nuclear disarmament.

The DOE Fiscal Year 2004 budget request includes $22 million to fund MPF design work and to continue the Environmental Impact Statement process for the project. DOE estimates the MPF will cost $2 to $4 billion for construction with operating costs at approximately $300 million per year. These early estimates preceding design selection will undoubtedly increase. Expenses for decommissioning, decontamination, cleanup and health care for affected workers and members of the public are very likely to push the costs much higher.

The MPF will also pose health and environmental risks. For instance, the DOE itself projects radiation doses to workers that are so high that they would be expected to cause several cancer deaths over the life of the plant. The MPF will generate significant amounts of radioactive waste and require transportation of tons of weapons grade plutonium on U.S. highways. Such a costly new pit production effort will absorb funds that might otherwise be devoted to cleaning up the Cold War legacy of environmental contamination from the nuclear weapons complex.

We urge you to cut the funding for the DOE's Modern Pit Facility and cancel this program immediately.

Sincerely,