



Savannah River Site Watch

**Savannah River Site Watch
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DOE Reveals it has No Plans to Receive Plutonium or Weapon-Grade Uranium (“Special Nuclear Material”) or Nuclear Weapons from North Korea, in Surprise Response to FOIA Request

[Freedom of Information Act \(FOIA\) Response to SRS Watch Linked Here](#)

Is Response Accurate or is there No Formal DOE Plan for Fate of N. Korean Weapons Materials?

Columbia, South Carolina – The United States Department of Energy has revealed that it has no plans to receive, store and dispose of nuclear weapons materials or nuclear weapons that might be obtained from North Korea.

In a response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request from Savannah River Site Watch (SRS Watch), DOE said that it was “unable to locate any documents” concerning the receipt and management of plutonium highly enriched uranium (HEU) - both “Special Nuclear Materials” (SNM) - or nuclear weapons that might be acquired from North Korea via force or under mutual agreement.

“The response that DOE has no plans to receive nuclear materials or nuclear weapons from North Korea comes as a surprise as DOE is the agency designated to manage nuclear materials and to dismantle nuclear weapons,” said Tom Clements, director of SRS Watch. “While we are often critical of additional, unnecessary shipment of nuclear materials and nuclear waste to SRS, we still anticipate that SRS or another DOE site could have a role in receiving any materials peacefully removed from North Korea. We welcome public dialogue about receipt of such materials if it would be in the mutual interest of both North and South Korea in establishing lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula,” added Clements.

According to some estimates, including by South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense, North Korea could possess around 50 kilograms of weapon-grade plutonium, possibly enough for as many as 25 nuclear weapons.

Plutonium in North Korea has been produced in the 5MWe nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, which is reported to have a plutonium-production capacity of 2 to 4 kilograms per year. Irradiated material removed from the reactors is processed in the nearby Radiochemical Laboratory (reprocessing facility).

DOE's Savannah River Site currently stores about 13 metric tons of US surplus weapons plutonium, destined to be disposed of as waste when the mismanaged plutonium fuel (MOX) project is finally terminated, as has been sought by the Trump administration.

In addition to the existing storage of a large amount of weapon-grade plutonium, SRS is a logical site to which North Korean plutonium might be taken. SRS has been designated the site to receive up to 900 kilograms of weapon-usable plutonium that has been stored at foreign commercial facilities. The shipment of that so-called "gap" plutonium is under the DOE's National Nuclear Security Administration's Office of Material Management and Minimization (M3), [formerly known as the Global Threat Reduction Initiative (GTRI)].

In an effort to reduce nuclear weapons held by all countries and to curb proliferation of nuclear weapons materials, Clements met several times in the mid-1990s with officials at the North Korean mission to the United Nations. One meeting occurred on March 12, 1993, the day that North Korea announced it would withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Clements and colleagues from Greenpeace International suggested to the North Koreans that they take the 3-month advance withdrawal notification to reconsider their action. That withdrawal was halted on June 11, 1993, but North Korea officially withdrew from the NPT in 2003 (as allowed by the treaty).

"It has long been hinted to me by US Government officials that SRS was prepared to receive North Korean plutonium. The public should understand that a possible side effect of a senseless war could be the secret receipt and storage of that material, possibly with no clear disposition path out of South Carolina," added Clements.

SRS Watch has not filed a FOIA request with the U.S. Department of Defense or any other agency concerning the removal of SNM and nuclear weapons from North Korea.

Additionally, SRS Watch supports both a halt to plutonium and HEU production in North Korea and opposes separation of those weapon-usable materials by South Korea, as part of an effort to secure formal peace agreements that include denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

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Notes:

FOIA response to SRS Watch, January 18, 2018 – concerning request for any DOE plans to receive, store or dispose of Special Nuclear Material (highly enriched uranium and plutonium) or nuclear weapons from North Korea:

http://www.srswatch.org/uploads/2/7/5/8/27584045/foia_response_n_korean_plutonium_weapons_to_doe_jan_17_2018.pdf

or

<https://tinyurl.com/yb32qlqu>

“We were unable to locate any documents responsive to your request.”

DOE document “ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR GAP MATERIAL PLUTONIUM – TRANSPORT, RECEIPT, AND PROCESSING,” December 2015

<https://www.srs.gov/general/pubs/envbul/documents/EA-2024-FEA-2015.pdf>

“NNSA’s first priority is to seek a foreign solution that does not involve bringing this material to the United States. If such a solution cannot be identified, NNSA proposes to receive weapons-usable plutonium from foreign countries and manage it at a DOE site in the United States. The Proposed Action is to transport up to 900 kilograms (1,984 pounds) of gap material plutonium by ship from countries in Europe, along the Pacific Rim, and in North America to a U.S. seaport of entry. From the port of entry, gap material plutonium would be transported by a specially designed transporter to SRS, where it would be placed in storage, processed as needed, and ultimately dispositioned along with surplus U.S. plutonium. Of the 900 kilograms (1,984 pounds) of gap material plutonium, it is currently projected that approximately 525 kilograms (1,157 pounds) would be in a form ready for disposition, and approximately 375 kilograms (827 pounds) would be in a form that requires stabilization. While the proportions may ultimately vary slightly, the total quantity of plutonium accepted by the program would not exceed 900 kilograms (1,984 pounds).”

Presentation by Institute for Science and International Security, “North Korea’s Nuclear Capabilities: A Fresh Look,” April 2017

https://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/North_Korea_Talk_April_28_2017_Final.pdf

Amount of plutonium estimated by ISIS: Median: 33.1 kg; standard deviation: 1.56 kg; full range: 23.2 to 37.3 kg, enough for 5 to 17 nuclear weapons, with enough uranium and plutonium for as much as 75 nuclear weapons.

Defense White Paper 2016, by S. Korean Ministry of National Defense:

http://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblicitn/PBLICTNEBOOK_201705180357180050.pdf

“North Korea is estimated to possess around 50kg of weapons-grade plutonium obtained from several rounds of reprocessing spent fuel rods. North Korea is also believed to have made significant headway in its HEU program.”

“North Korea’s Yongbyon Facility: Probable Production of Additional Plutonium for Nuclear Weapons,” by 38 North, July 2017

<https://www.38north.org/2017/07/yongbyon071417/>

“5 MWe Reactor: The thermal patterns observed at the 5 MWe Reactor remain relatively consistent with those observed in the previous report indicating either intermittent low-level or no operation of the reactor. There was a notable deviation in the December 2016 and January 2017 images, suggesting a period of higher level reactor operation that lends support to a [previous analysis based upon natural color imagery.](#)”

SRS Watch on line:

<http://www.srswatch.org/>

<https://www.facebook.com/SavannahRiverSiteWatch>

<https://twitter.com/srswatch>