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Guest Editorial: New Plutonium Warhead Mission at SRS is the Pits

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Succumbing to organizational flaws, the U.S. Department of Energy is rushing into a controversial and complex project at the [Savannah River Site](#) for which costs and need have not been established.

That new project is the production of plutonium “pits” for nuclear weapons. A pit is the hollow spherical core that initiates the nuclear explosion.

Do we want the focus at SRS to remain on the urgent clean-up of nuclear waste and pursuit of advanced technologies or do we want to shift to risky nuclear weapons activities with more plutonium import and more waste?

Beyond storing plutonium, production of small quantities of purified plutonium oxide and downblending small amounts of plutonium for disposal as waste, SRS has no experience casting liquid plutonium into pits.

In 2015, Congress established a requirement for production capability of [80 pits per year](#) but repeal of that is under discussion in Congress.

The Plutonium Bomb Plant is based on “repurposing” of the shuttered plutonium fuel (MOX) building, a bungled project rife with construction problems, to produce 50 or more pits per year by 2030.

Before considering reuse of the MOX plant, on which over \$5 billion was wasted, an examination is needed of why MOX failed and who is responsible. Investigations by Congress into fraud, waste, abuse and mismanagement are essential.

DOE estimated that conversion of the MOX plant [could cost up to \\$5.4 billion](#). A recent report to Congress by the [Institute for Defense Analysis](#) underscored that it could find no successful DOE project costing more than \$700 million that was completed within 16 years.

Los Alamos National Lab, which now has a limit of 20 pits per year, would produce 30 or more pits per year. But plutonium operations there have been in chaos and were recently halted for several years.

Ominously, it appears that these pits are for [new nuclear weapons](#) that could contribute to both a looming nuclear arms race and continued delays in implementation of disarmament requirements of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

With up to 20,000 pits stored at DOE's Pantex site in Texas and with 1750 nuclear weapons deployed and another [2000 in active reserve](#), there is simply no need for new make-work pit production.

A report for DOE in 2006 by an expert [group called JASON](#) said that "most plutonium pit types have credible lifetimes of at least 100 years," so pit reuse is viable.

As the DOE nuclear weapons [budget grows](#) and pressure rises on clean-up programs, spending large sums on pit production can only distract from urgent clean-up at SRS. As pits would add to chemical and radioactive waste streams at the site, [we have forced DOE](#) to prepare an [Environmental Impact Statement](#) on the imprudent proposal.

As SRS is still challenged with over 35 million gallons of high-level nuclear waste in 43 aging tanks, the focus must remain on safe packaging of that waste, with its eventual disposal in a geologic repository.

It's time to hit the brakes on the poorly conceived pit project.

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