



Savannah River Site Watch

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Columbia, South Carolina

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Department of Energy Budget Roll-Out Bungled, Request for Fiscal Year 2022 Reveals Savannah River Site Plutonium Bomb Plant (PBP) Cost Soars to Staggering \$11.1 Billion; SRS Plutonium Pit Project Requests \$603 Million in FY22, with \$475 Million for Conversion of MOX Plant to Pit Production - Funding Requests are Far Under Annual Levels Needed to Pull Off the Controversial Project

Columbia, SC – The U.S. Department of Energy budget request to Congress for Fiscal Year 2022 holds some startling surprises related to fabrication of plutonium “pits” for nuclear warheads at the DOE’s Savannah River Site in South Carolina. The biggest shock in the budget request by DOE’s National Nuclear Security Administration is that the total estimated cost of the SRS pit plant has soared to \$11.1 billion, more than double the previous cost estimate of \$4.6 billion (in the FY 21 budget request).

Thus, in a one-week period, the cost estimate of the SRS Plutonium Bomb Plant (PBP) has more than doubled in cost and the schedule for the facility’s initial operation has slipped up to five years. These troubling and potentially debilitating developments foreshadow problems to come to the challenging pit-production project, according to the public interest group Savannah River Site Watch.

The breath-taking \$11.1 billion cost comes weeks before a key decision will be made on the planning for the facility, so-called “Critical-Decision-1.” That decision point will include a cost range for the PBP and the budget states that the \$11.1 billion “value does not represent the CD-1 approved high end of the range.” (pages 220 and 225) Thus, an even higher figure can be expected to be reported in mid-June. DOE claims that better cost estimates will come with “CD-2/3 approval in FY23-24.” (page 211)

Given DOE’s extremely poor track record in managing complex and costly construction projects, as was seen with the MOX debacle, it is fully expected that the pit plant cost will increase over time and that the schedule for the project will continue to slip. The high cost of the SRS pit plant construction and operation will put extreme pressure on both the pit project and the new W87-1 nuclear warhead - atop the new, proposed Ground Based Strategic Deterrent missile - for which the first pits would be made, according to SRS Watch.

Though pressure is growing on the unneeded GBSD, DOE and DOD have so far refused to reassess the supposed need for the costly weapons system and the need for new plutonium pits on its warhead. Over 15,000 pits are in storage at DOE’s Pantex site in Texas and experts have stated that they “have credible minimum lifetimes in excess of 100 years as regards aging of plutonium.” (JASON “Pit Lifetime” report to NNSA, January 2007)

The DOE budget request includes \$603 million for “Savannah River Plutonium Modernization,” with \$475 million of that being for conversion of the partially constructed plutonium fuel (MOX) plant into the SRS Plutonium Bomb Plant, which DOE calls the Savannah River Plutonium Processing Facility. (page 171) The pit plant would receive \$233 million more than it did in FY22. Yet these funding levels are far below what DOE admits it annually needs.

According to the budget request, if \$475 million is approved for Fiscal Year 2022 spending on the SRS pit plant, \$9.6 billion will be left to go to reach the \$11.1 billion cost of the PBP. (page 220) This means that around \$800-900 million per year will be needed for the construction project alone. “The incredible sums of money that DOE claims that it annually needs over the next decade for SRS pit-plant construction and support activities reveal the fragility of the project and that it could fail due to cost reasons alone,” said Clements of SRS Watch. The FY22 budget request falls far short of the needed annual spending and DOE has not explained how much larger funding amounts will be obtained. “Given challenges in converting the MOX plant to pit production and the technical hurdles in making pits, a mission never undertaken by SRS, could also lead to project failure,” added Clements.

The budget request confirms a delay in the SRS pit plant from the stated goal of it producing 50 pits per year by 2030. The documents states that “achieving the required 50 war reserve ppy production rate at the Savannah River Site in 2030 is not likely.” (page 211) During testimony before the Senate Armed Service Committee on May 26, 2021, Jill Hruby, the nominee to be the NNSA administration revealed that the project that had slipped from 2030 to between 2030 and 2035. (See below for link to archived hearing.) That delay will only increase cost pressure on the project, according to SRS Watch.

“Plans to throw vast sums of our money at an unjustified, rushed Plutonium Bomb Plant, central to a new nuclear arms race, is a DOE formula for failure and, like the mismanaged MOX project, is guaranteed to run far over budget and fall far behind schedule,” according to Tom Clements, director of SRS Watch. “Congress should reject the extravagant spending levels that DOE is proposing for production of plutonium pits and stop consideration of SRS for this dangerous and costly mission,” added Clements. “Production of 80 pits per year at Los Alamos and Savannah River should be halted and efforts put into increasing national security by entering into international nuclear weapons disarmament negotiations,” said Clements.

The release of the DOE budget was badly bungled, with the NNSA budget volume not being released until around 7 p.m. on Friday, May 28. Due to this embarrassing stumble, reports and members of the public were left hanging as to how DOE was proposing to spend tax payer funds. Key budget documents for DOE’s environmental clean-up and nuclear energy programs had inexplicably not been posted by mid-day Saturday, May 29.

In the SRS budget discussion are included a host of “TBAs” (To Be Determined), meaning that the project is not yet mature enough for cost estimates to be posted for a host of pit-project activities. “This sea of TBAs implies that budget and technical land mines lurk for the pit project at every future turn,” according to Clements.

SRS Watch, along with fellow members of the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability - Nuclear Watch New Mexico and Tri-Valley CAREs - are reviewing legal options given NNSA’s failure to prepare the mandated Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) to review system-wide impacts of pit production. The South Carolina Environmental Law Project (SCELP), representing the groups, notified DOE on April

20 that it would file a lawsuit within 60 days for failure to comply with the requirements of the National Environmental policy Act (NEPA).

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Notes:

DOE's Fiscal Year 2022 budget request posted here, with link to the NNSA volume, posted on Friday evening, May 28, 2021: <https://www.energy.gov/cfo/articles/fy-2022-budget-justification>

Senate Armed Services hearing, May 26, 2021; NNSA administrator nominee Jill Hruby reveals that the SRS pit plant is delayed for up to 5 years; see comments on pit production at 55 minutes in archived webcast: https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/nominations_hruby-rose-rosenblum-maier

South Carolina Environmental Law Project (SCELP) is representing SRS Watch, Nuclear Watch New Mexico and Tri-Valley CAREs in a possible lawsuit in late June against DOE for not meeting NEPA environmental law in planning for plutonium pit-production expansion – see SCELP's "pit page," including April 21, 2021 news release and letter to DOE: https://www.scelp.org/cases/plutonium-pits?blm_aid=29089

On challenges to pit production:

Institute for Defense Analysis (IDA) "Independent Assessment of the Two-Site Pit Production Decision: Executive Summary," May 2019, <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/i/in/independent-assessment-of-the-two-site-pit-production-decision-executive-summary/d-10711.ashx>

NNSA's 293-page "Pu Pit Production Engineering Assessment," by Parsons is available at: https://nukewatch.org/importantdocs/resources/Pu-Pit-Engineering-Assessment-Report-Rev-2_20-April-2018.pdf