Savannah River Site Watch

Savannah River Site Watch
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Nuclear Weapons Funding Request for Savannah River Site Takes a Huge Leap in Support of Dangerous, Enduring U.S. Plans to Fight a Full-Scale Nuclear War

SRS to Take a Larger Role in Nuclear Weapons Activities as Funding for SRS Plutonium Bomb Plant Spirals Out of Control, Increasing 189% in One Year and Nearing $1 Billion Per Year

See DOE's "FY 202323 Budget Justification":
https://www.energy.gov/cfo/articles/fy-2023-budget-justification

Columbia, SC – Details of the U.S. Department of Energy's nuclear weapons budget request for Fiscal Year 2023 were released on Friday, April 22, 2022, and a frightening picture emerges of a nation engaged in a nuclear weapons buildup emerges. A key to DOE's plans to make new nuclear weapons and upgrade old ones is dependent on a host of new production facilities, with the proposed Savannah River Site (SRS) Plutonium Bomb Plant (PBP) playing a key role in expanded reliance on nuclear weapons.

DOE's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) produces and maintains nuclear weapons for its client, the U.S. Department of Defense, and its critical role is often overlooked by those who don't realize the role of DOE in nuclear weapons.

"The DOE budget request reveals a sharp jump in funding for nuclear weapons activities at SRS, which will raise the threat of nuclear war," said Tom Clements, director of the public interest group Savannah River Site Watch. "There is simply no justification in wasting billions of dollars on a plutonium pit plant at SRS, which is being pursued not for deterrence but in support of a startling US policy to fight a full-scale nuclear war," added Clements.

The overall National Nuclear Security Administration Fiscal Year 2023 request is $21,410,000,000, an increase of $1,678,200,000 (8.5 percent) above the FY 2021 Enacted Level. Of that, $16,486,298 is for "weapons activities." (See budget section "National Nuclear Security Administration.")

The NNSA budget request for Fiscal Year 2023 for SRS is a total of $1.47 billion - Savannah River Operations Office plus SRS contractors. (See page 38 pdf in section on NNSA). The bulk of that amount consists of planning for fabrication of plutonium pits, the core of all US nuclear weapons, and for

processing and packaging of tritium gas, a radioactive gas that boosts the explosive power of all US weapons.

The stunning nuclear weapons funding request for SRS for Fiscal Year 2023 and in outyears, FY 2024-2027, appears in the budget section entitled "Weapons Activities."

Plutonium pit operations at SRS, in support of the proposed SRS Plutonium Bomb Plant, jump from $442 million appropriated in FY22 (plus another $91 million for "Enterprise Plutonium Support") to a FY23 request of $758 million (plus $89 million for "Enterprise Plutonium Support"). (See Weapons Activities, page 14.) "Plutonium modernization" funding at SRS has increased a draw-dropping 71.6% from FY 21 to FY 23 and funding for the pit plant has soared a stunning 189%.

"Throwing budget-busting amounts of money at the SRS pit plant won't make it happen given the daunting challenges facing the project - that SRS has no pit-production experience and the pits it might produce simply aren't needed," said Clements. "The SRS pit project needs to be slowed down and it must undergo a deeper analysis from the perspectives of need, risk of nuclear war and costs."

The goal had been for SRS to produce 50 pits per year by 2030 but that date has slipped to at least 2035, which means costs will likely further spiral out of control.

For Los Alamos National Lab, funding for plutonium pit production - called "Los Alamos Plutonium Modernization" - leaps from$1.1 billion to $1.6 billion (Weapons Activities, page 13) DOE aims to produce 30 pits per year at Los Alamos by 2026, which will be a significant challenge given chronic problems with existing pit production and overall plutonium operations at LANL.

Outyear funding for the SRS Plutonium Bomb Plant, from FY24 to FY 27, makes a huge leap, with a projected request of $828 million in FY24, rising to around $1 billion per year for the next three years. Overall, the projected "plutonium modernization" request at SRS takes a similar jump, from $928 million in FY24 to over $1 billion for the next three years.

Outyear funding for the pit facilities at Los Alamos remain well over $1 billion per year from FY24 to FY 27. (See Weapons Activities, p. 18)

Total "plutonium modernization" for SRS and LANL increases from $1.6 billion appropriated in FY 22 to a request of $2.4 billion in FY23, a shocking increase of $814 million, or 51%.

The SRS and Los Alamos pit facilities are slated to fabricate new pits for new nuclear weapons, not for pits to maintain existing weapons. Those new weapons would increase US nuclear weapons capabilities and fly in the face of President Biden's campaign promise to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons.

The SRS pit facility reached "Critical Decsion-1" on June 29, 2021, when DOE presented a cost estimate for the SRS Plutonium Bomb Plant of from $6.9 billion to $11.1 billion. This cost range ignores the $8 billion that has already been sunk into the facility, in a failed effort to construct a plutonium fuel (MOX) facility. Thus, the SRS pit plant could be located in a facility that cost almost $20 billion.

SRS Watch, Nuclear Watch New Mexico and Tri-Valley CAREs await a decision by the federal court in Columbia, SC in response to a lawsuit calling for NNSA to prepare a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) on pit production. In the environmental documents that NNSA did prepare, many impacts were not analyzed and impacts at sites other than SRS and Los Alamos were totally overlooked. The groups expect a positive decision from the court. (See plutonium pit by website by the groups' legal counsel, the South Carolina Environmental Law Project: https://www.scelp.org/cases/plutonium-pits.)

"Rather than taking steps to reduce the threat of nuclear war, Biden has proposed a budget which undermines our collective security by increasing reliance on nuclear weapons," said Clements. "Along with skyrocketing nuclear weapons funding, the US Government refuses to make a pledge of 'no first use' of nuclear weapons and drags its feet on additional disarmament measures. Given the alarming threat by Putin to use nuclear weapons, now is exactly the time for bold steps to be taken by the US to lead the way in reducing reliance on nuclear weapons. But Biden is not only frozen into inaction concerning arms reductions but has moved in the opposite direction, serving to increase global risks while pleasing the corporations which benefit from the costly manufacture of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems," added Clements. "Bottom line is that plans for new pit production must be halted."

The new pits would be first for the W93 warhead, for a new Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile, and then for the W87-1 warhead, to be used in a replacement Intercontinental Ballistic Missile. The funding for the W93 rockets from $53 million in FY22 to a request of $741 million in FY23, a shocking increase of 354%. Funding for the W87-1 increases 26%, from $541 million in FY 22 to a request of $680 million in FY23. Outyear funding, from FY24-FY27, likewise increases each year.

Also at SRS are activities that process and package tritium, a radioactive gas used to boost the explosive power of all US nuclear weapons. Tritium Sustainment and Modernization increases from $312 million to $362 million and funds for the Tritium Finishing Facility, under construction in the H-Area, increases from $27 million to $73 million. (Weapons Activities, page 124)

"It is believed that some on Capitol Hill realize that the large increases in nuclear weapons aren't sustainable or wise and will only increases risk, thus giving hope that cooler heads will prevail as the situation with new nuclear weapons and new facilities becomes clearer over time," said Clements.

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Notes:

DOE Fiscal Year 2023 budget request, posted on April 22, 2022 by the DOE's Chief Financial Officer (CFO): "Detailed Budget Justification - Energy and Water Development Appropriations":
https://www.energy.gov/cfo/articles/fy-2023-budget-justification

Section on NNSA "Weapons Activities":
https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/doe-fy2023-budget-volume-1-nnsa-wa-v2.pdf

CFO budget justifications from previous years:
https://www.energy.gov/cfo/listings/budget-justification-supporting-documents