



Savannah River Site Watch

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Columbia, South Carolina

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DOE Official Heightens Concerns about Controversial Plutonium Bomb Plant at Savannah River Site by Admitting an Additional 6-Month Delay in the Project; Cost Could Jump \$375 Million, to \$11.5 Billion

As Russia and the U.S. Recklessly Flirt with Nuclear War, the Plutonium “Pit” Facility in South Carolina Would Play Key Role in New Nuclear Weapons Integral to Planning for Nuclear War

Columbia, SC – A facility proposed to make the key plutonium component for new U.S. nuclear warheads faces another substantial delay, according a U.S. Department of Energy official at a nuclear meeting in South Carolina. The unsurprising delay of construction of the Plutonium Bomb Plant, proposed to make plutonium “pits” at the U.S. Department of Energy’s sprawling 310-square-mile Savannah River Site (SRS) near Aiken, SC, could push the already exorbitant price tag to \$11.5 billion or more.

In an unexpected oral comment that comes as the dark cloud of nuclear war hangs over the world, the official in charge of DOE’s nuclear weapons work at SRS publicly revealed this week that construction of the facility to make plutonium pits, or cores, for new nuclear weapons, has been delayed again, by a minimum of 6 months. The weapons facility had initially been proposed to be operational in 2030, then in 2021 the date slipped to between 2032 and 2035.

DOE is pursuing dual pit plants at SRS and the Los Alamos National Lab in New Mexico, to initially make 80 or more pits per year for at least two new nuclear warheads planned by the Department of Defense - the W87-1 for a new ICBM and the W-93 for a submarine-launched ballistic missile. Then, DOE, which assembles and maintains nuclear weapons for DOD, would replace pits in all 4000 active and reserve warheads.

The pit plants would make the ~3kg plutonium spheres used in all U.S. nuclear weapons. The U.S. is maintaining a large nuclear arsenal to keep the U.S. on a footing to fight a full-scale nuclear war and not for “minimal deterrence.” (A declassified version of President Biden’s Nuclear Posture Review, containing policies concerning nuclear weapons, is anticipated to soon be released.)

“Our prediction that the unneeded SRS plutonium pit plant would continue to face significant delays and substantial cost increases is sadly being proven true,” said Tom Clements, director of the public interest group Savannah River Site Watch. “At this time when talk of nuclear war and Armageddon is being carelessly thrown around by both Russia and the U.S., cooler heads must prevail and plans for new plutonium pit plants and provocative new nuclear warheads must be cancelled. In the name of global peace and security, all parties must halt talk of nuclear war, stop actions stimulating a new nuclear arms race and sit down to negotiate disarmament, as required by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty,” added Clements.

At the South Carolina Nuclear Advisory Council meeting in Columbia, SC on October 24, 2022, Mr. Jason Armstrong, manager of DOE’s National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) activities at SRS, stated that the next key decision point for the facility, Critical Decision-2, would likely be the middle of Fiscal Year 2025 (or around April 1, 2025). On June 28, 2021, in Critical Decision-1, which gave the go-ahead for planning and revealed a preliminary cost estimate of up to \$11.1 billion, DOE said that CD-2 would be in Fiscal Year 2024, which ends on September 30, 2024. Thus, Armstrong inadvertently revealed at least a 6-month delay. At CD-2, a preliminary design is approved, along with a definitive cost and schedule. At CD-3, construction can begin.

In response to question from Nuclear Advisory Council chairman Rick Lee about the status of CD-2, Mr. Armstrong laughed nervously and said “Oh, that’s a good question. That’s a good question.” He then turned to Mr. Stuart McVean, CEO of Savannah River Nuclear Solutions, the company leading the design, and asked “What’s the best date you’re hearing so far, Stewart?” McVean responded “Middle of 25.” Armstrong then said “I’m hearing middle of Fiscal Year 25 also.” He added “We’re just been working with SRNS to identify a construction contractor that SRNS will manage to increase the efficiency of construction activities.”

Armstrong also said that the design of the SRS Plutonium Bomb Plant was 40% complete.

The minimum amount that Congress is likely to appropriate for Fiscal Year 2024 spending on the SRS pit plant is around \$750 million and will likely be well over \$1 billion. A six-month delay would thus cost a minimum of approximately \$375 million. “The annual pit plant costs will go up in the coming years and, according to the way DOE works, the cost increase due to the just-announced schedule delay will never be recovered,” said Clements. DOE’s target for annual spending on the SRS pit project, based on figures presented in the FY24 budget, appears to be about \$1 billion per year.

A lawsuit remains before a federal judge in South Carolina in which the plaintiffs - SRS Watch, Nuclear Watch New Mexico (Santa Fe, NM) and Tri-Valley CAREs (Livermore, CA) - have demanded that a programmatic environmental impact statement (PEIS) on pit production be prepared. The PEIS would analyze impacts of pit production at all DOE sites, including heretofore unanalyzed disposal of plutonium by-product waste (transuranic waste) from pit production in the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in New Mexico. The South Carolina Environmental Law Project (SCELP) represents the groups. A ruling by the judge could come at any time.

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Notes:

Link to archived video of “Governor’s Nuclear Advisory Council” meeting October 24, 2022, go to 26 minutes, 10 seconds for comment on SRS Plutonium Bomb Plant delay; public comment on the pit-plant delay by Tom Clements, SRS Watch director, is at 3:4:20 -

<https://www.scstatehouse.gov/video/archives.php>

NNSA statement on Critical Decision-1 being reached, June 28, 2021, with cost figures:

<https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/nnsa-approves-critical-decision-1-savannah-river-plutonium-processing-facility>

SRS Watch documentation on slippage in 2021 of schedule for SRS Plutonium Bomb Plant, along with doubling of cost, June 14, 2021: <https://srswatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/DOE-documentation-SRS-pit-plant-delay-and-cost-increase-June-14-2021.pdf>

See DOE explanation of the five Critical Decision levels (CD-0 to CD-4):

<https://opss.fnal.gov/critical-decision-overview/>

South Carolina Nuclear Advisory Council agenda and link to all presentations of October 24, 2022:

<https://www.admin.sc.gov/Nuclear-Advisory-Council-%28NAC%29-Meetings>

Jason Armstrong presentation “Overview of Missions at Savannah River Site,” October 24, 2022:

https://www.admin.sc.gov/sites/default/files/real_property/NNSA.pdf

Stewart McVean presentation “SRNS Fall 2022 Update,” October 24, 2022:

https://www.admin.sc.gov/sites/default/files/real_property/SRNS_Fall_GNAC_Presentation%20-%20MacVean.pptx

NNSA FY 2024 weapons budget request, for SRS plutonium processing plant and out years, see pages 121 and 125 (not final figure for FY 2024): <https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/doe-fy2023-budget-volume-1-nnsa-wa-v2.pdf>

Most recent filings by SCLP and DOJ in lawsuit demanding Programmatic EIS on pit production:

<https://srswatch.org/doe-faces-amended-complaint-in-federal-court-over-inadequate-environmental-review-of-plutonium-pit-production-for-new-nuclear-weapons-at-srs-and-los-alamos-and-other-doe-sites/>