



Savannah River Site Watch

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Document withheld from Public Reveals DOE Cost Estimate for Plutonium Pit Project at Savannah River Site Hits \$16.5 Billion, Over \$5 Billion Higher than Current Public Estimate

Columbia, SC -- A key U.S. Department of Energy document assessing the progress of planning for the proposed plutonium pit project at the Savannah River Site includes a cost range billions of dollars higher than what has been previously known. DOE has not made the document public and it is only now being released by a non-profit organization tracking the costly project.

The document prepared in 2021 by the DOE's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) estimates that the controversial project to fabricate plutonium pits (cores) for new nuclear warheads could range from \$8.7 billion to \$16.5 billion, far higher than the currently known cost range of \$6.9 billion to \$11.1 billion.

The cost estimate for the SRS Plutonium Processing Facility (SRPPF) - also known as the SRS Plutonium Bomb Plant (SRS PBP) - is presented in a brief report by a NNSA team that analyzed the SRS pit project in March 2021, three months before the current cost estimate was released and the complicated project given the go-ahead. The review of the documentation to move ahead with the pit project is titled *Critical Decision (CD)-1 Independent Project Review (IPR) - Savannah River Plutonium Processing Facility (SRPPF)*. [Correct spelling is "Savannah."]

The SRS pit "project review," requested by the acting administrator of the NNSA, was obtained on January 9, 2023 by the public interest organization Savannah River Site Watch via a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request.

The document affirms that the congressionally mandated 2030 date to fabricate 50 or more plutonium pits at SRS, in the shell of the partially finished plutonium fuel (MOX) building, cannot be met and makes the startling revelation that the facility would not produce pits until February 2036, a full 2 years after the anticipated 2034 approval to operate (so-called Critical Decision-4). In those two years, according to the document, there would be "four additional, post CD-4, milestones for the start of hot operations, operations, process prove-in (PPI), and 50 Pits delivered."

That 2036 start date for the SRS nuclear bomb facility is beyond the 2032-2035 start date presented in congressional testimony by NNSA. The Critical Decision-1 go-ahead decision and rough cost estimate came in June 2021 but a more refined cost estimate might not be available for four years, when Critical

Decision-2 is reached in mid-2025, with a new project cost baseline and a supposed 90% design completion. The just-revealed cost estimate includes CD-1 costs.

“Given the myriad of cost and schedule threats facing the SRS pit facility, it’s simply not acceptable that DOE will for four years hide updated cost estimates and technical updates for this daunting project,” said Tom Clements, director of SRS Watch, in Columbia, SC. “The shocking cost jumps and continuous delays raise questions about the need for the redundant SRS pit plant to produce pits for questionable new nuclear warheads, which is being pursued at SRS to fill the funding hole when the MOX boondoggle was terminated in 2018,” added Clements.

This significantly higher cost estimate of the SRS program to make new plutonium pits for new nuclear warheads is actually higher as “it does not include Fee or NNSA Other Direct Cost (ODC), both of which are still being developed, typically they are 4% and 2% respectively.”

The document being released by SRS Watch is mentioned in a footnote (on page 3) in a report issued on January 13, 2023 by the Governmental Accountability Office - *NNSA Does Not Have a Comprehensive Schedule or Cost Estimate for Pit Production Capability* (<https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-104661>) but the cost information in the just-released NNSA report was not mentioned or analyzed by the GAO.

Rather, GAO reported the NNSA’s cost figures for the SRS pit plant from the Fiscal Year 2023 budget justification - \$6.9 billion to \$11.1 billion - and cited NNSA’s “concerns that publicizing preliminary or uncertain information would lead to misinterpretation over increasing costs if preliminary numbers rise.” Instead, NNSA has chosen silence about new cost information, which is leading to confusion and mistrust, according to SRS Watch.

The GAO also said that “using NNSA’s fiscal year 2023 budget justification GAO identified at least \$18 billion to \$24 billion in potential costs for the 80-pit-per-year” pit production construction costs at the Savannah River Site and the Los Alamos National Lab (LANL), where NNSA is aiming for production of 30 or more pits per year. That cost range is based on the DOE estimate of \$6.9 billion to \$11.1 billion for the SRS pit plant.

The just-revealed \$8.7 billion to \$16.5 billion SRS pit plant cost could increase the range of the cost of the two pit facilities to a staggering \$19.8 billion to \$29.4 billion. Though such a cost is speculative, the increase fits with the fate of the mismanaged plutonium fuel (MOX) project at SRS, which suffered huge and debilitating cost growth over time. GAO repeatedly pointed out that MOX was a high-risk project and now it appears that the dual-track pit project may be headed down the same path.

A number of cost and schedule threats are recognized in the cursory 51-page NNSA review, including “the timely delivery of war reserve parts, gloveboxes, specialty hand tools, machines, and fixtures are among the principal threats to the SRPPF project. In addition to these supply chain risks, the availability of the requisite number and type of craft and non-craft labor personnel are expected to hinder SRPPF project performance as it has other NSE [Nuclear Security Enterprise] projects.”

The report points out design concerns and says “updated seismic analysis and structural code changes may require design revisions” and that rebar in concrete walls and slabs will have to be cut. Also highlighted is the risk of supply of gloveboxes, in which plutonium is handled. The large number of gloveboxes needed for the project may “overwhelm the capability of glovebox vendors to satisfy demand.” The SRS project will strain vendors as it “requires procurement and fabrication of

approximately 411 gloveboxes which is approximately six times the number of gloveboxes required for the Los Alamos Plutonium Pit Production Project (LAP4).”

“NNSA must implement transparency about the challenging SRS pit project and regularly release cost and technical information but it appears they are choosing the path of needless secrecy and obfuscation, a sure sign the project isn’t healthy,” said Clements. “The clock is ticking on this project and it sadly looks like we could have another MOX debacle in the making by an inflexible bureaucracy that urgently needs an education in openness,” added Clements.

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Notes:

NNSA, “FINAL REPORT, *Critical Decision (CD)-1 Independent Project Review (IPR) - Savannah River Plutonium Processing Facility (SRPPF)*, March 15-19, 2021,” [should be “Savannah”], <https://srswatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Doc-1-SRPPF-CD-1-IPR-Final-Report-210505-2.pdf>

FOIA cover letter to SRS Watch providing *Critical Decision (CD)-1 Independent Project Review (IPR) - Savannah River Plutonium Processing Facility (SRPPF)*, dated December 29, 2022 but emailed on January 9, 2023, <https://srswatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/FOIA-23-00054-M-Clements-FRL-2.pdf>

NNSA news statement, “NNSA approves Critical Decision 1 for Savannah River Plutonium Processing Facility,” June 28, 2021, <https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/nnsa-approves-critical-decision-1-savannah-river-plutonium-processing-facility>

GAO report, *NNSA Does Not Have a Comprehensive Schedule or Cost Estimate for Pit Production Capability*, January 13, 2023, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-104661>

SRS Watch news, “DOE Official Reveals Costly 6-Month Delay in Proposed SRS Plutonium Bomb Plant (PBP),” October 27, 2022, <https://srswatch.org/doe-official-reveals-costly-6-month-delay-in-proposed-srs-plutonium-bomb-plant-pbp-price-tag-gets-closer-to-a-stunning-12-billion/>