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Op-ed by Allie Maloney, *a native Georgian and graduate of the School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Georgia, is a Scoville Peace Fellow for the Nuclear Information Project at Federation of American Scientists.*

## The sad legacy of the Savannah River plutonium plant

A Cold War-era nuclear facility poisoned Georgians, and the federal government is doing little about it as it seeks to repurpose the site.

A federal judge [recently determined](#) that the U.S. Department of Energy and its semiautonomous National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) violated environmental regulations in their plan for producing plutonium pits for nuclear weapons at the Savannah River Site in South Carolina. And that was just the tip of the iceberg. When it comes to its nuclear weapons program, the United States has a historical pattern of putting citizens at risk, contaminating the environment and wasting billions in taxpayer dollars while not giving the public the full story or the chance to have an input.

This must stop.

The Savannah River National Laboratory sits near the Georgia-South Carolina border between Augusta and Aiken. This site has a long history of involvement in the research and production of nuclear materials for both civilian and military use.

Starting in the 1950s and continuing into the Cold War, the Savannah River Site (SRS) produced materials such as tritium and plutonium-239 for nuclear weapons. It [produced](#) around 36 metric tons of plutonium from 1953 to 1988, which is the amount of plutonium needed to [make around 5,800](#) of the bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki.

After the Cold War ended and the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to reduce their nuclear weapons stockpiles, the Savannah River Site was [converted to a cleanup facility](#) in 1985. Thus, hazardous waste was shipped to the site to be processed and stored. Mismanagement of waste disposal has been heavily documented. In 1989, [SRS was placed](#) on “EPA’s National Priorities List (NPL) because of chemical (primarily metals and solvents) and radiological contamination of on-site groundwater.” A 2007 [study by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry](#) said, “Waste handling, storage, and spills have resulted in on-site groundwater contamination. Additionally, some contamination continues to discharge directly from the waste storage areas or from groundwater plumes to on-site surface water streams and, eventually, the Savannah River.” In 2005, the SRS [End State Vision was established](#) to permanently clean up all

nuclear materials and hazardous waste at the site by 2025. But by the end of fiscal year 2023, only 420 of the 515 sites were [cleaned up or remediated](#). That's about 80% done with only two years left in the 20-year program.

In 1997, the SRS also began construction of a Mixed Oxide Fuel Fabrication facility that would [repurpose excess weapons-grade plutonium](#) for civilian power reactors.

The project began with a [budget of \\$4.8 billion](#) and was meant to be completed in 2016. These projections, however, quickly [started to rise](#) because of “the lack of credible, reliable cost and schedule data.” The 2018 report revealed that the final budget was \$17.2 billion, \$11 billion taxpayer dollars over budget, and the project's new completion date was in 2048, 32 years behind schedule. The federal government finally [terminated the MOX project](#), leading to [1,100 layoff notices](#) for SRS employees.

Even after multiple debacles of the Department of Energy's mismanagement of budgets, deadlines and waste, a new project is underway.

The NNSA is now repurposing the failed MOX fuel fabrication facility to [produce plutonium pits](#), the core in the center of nuclear warheads that causes the explosion. The NNSA alleges that creating new pits is necessary to replace the “aging” nuclear stockpile. However, though plutonium does degrade over time, multiple [studies have shown](#) that pits last more than 100 years, and even a 150-year-old pit could still detonate as designed, leaving questions about the project's purpose.

For the DOE to fulfill the recent military and legal requirements mandating the production of 80 pits per year by 2030, the [NNSA developed](#) a “two-site strategy” between Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico and the Savannah River Site, which has been tasked with establishing the ability to produce “no fewer than 50” pits a year. In 2023, the [Government Accountability Office](#) found that the NNSA's “plans for reestablishing pit production do not follow best practices and run the risk of cost increases and delays.”

U.S. plutonium pit manufacturing comes with a dark history. The last pit manufacturing facility, Rocky Flats in Colorado, was [shut down](#) in 1989 by an FBI raid for violating Environmental Protection Agency regulations, and the communities living near this facility and employees are to this day seeing the [adverse health impacts](#). The [Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment found](#) “increased cancer risk to residents living or working in surrounding communities during the plant's operation from 1952 to 1989.” According to The New York Times, new production at Los Alamos “is expected to generate levels of radiological and hazardous waste that the lab has not experienced.”

Now, advocacy groups are trying to prevent a repetition of this human health and environmental disaster, and they recently experienced a big win in holding the NNSA accountable.

A federal judge recently [ruled in favor of the plaintiffs](#), including Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition and Savannah River Site Watch groups, which allege the NNSA failed to prepare a new Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement that examines the possible environmental

and economic consequences of waste disposal and the multibillion-dollar program. [Judge Mary Geiger Lewis wrote](#), “The Court is unconvinced Defendants took a hard look at the combined effects of environmental impacts of their two-site strategy. But, even assuming they did, their ‘decision not to prepare a supplemental EIS was arbitrary [and] capricious.’”

While the government pushes forward on this project, there are still injustices from past projects that remain unreconciled.

[Employees who worked](#) at the Savannah River Site from Jan. 1, 1953, through Sept. 30, 1972, are entitled to compensation for medical bills caused by exposure to hazardous materials. But [recent reporting](#) by the local Augusta newspaper exposing the high levels of cancer among SRS employees estimated that the Department of Labor denies 66% of applications by SRS employees facing adverse health impacts for compensation.

A [former employee](#) who has experienced five types of cancers and has been denied coverage said, “I would have never stepped foot in those facilities knowing what I know now. I would have done something else with my career.” This is why the government’s refusal to properly educate employees and communities surrounding the site on the real purpose and risks of its projects is harmful.

This site is not a one-time cover-up. It is part of a pattern of the United States denying lifesaving assistance to people poisoned by radiation exposure from its nuclear weapons program, from [veterans who were placed in front of nuclear explosions](#) to serve as guinea pigs to [people who worked at these weapons manufacturing facilities](#) to [civilians who lived “downwind” from nuclear test sites](#).

While groups across the United States fight to get justice for their increasing medical bills through compensation programs like the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act or RECA, the government refuses to pay up. Congress allowed RECA to expire [in June 2024](#) over concerns that it costs too much money — just as the United States is projected to [spend \\$1.2 trillion](#) on modernizing and maintaining its nuclear weapons stockpile over the next three decades.

U.S. nuclear weapons are touted as protecting U.S. citizens, but, in reality, they are actively harming people to this day. The controversy over the nuclear weapons project at the Savannah River Site is not new nor exclusive to one site. If the government wants to spend billions of dollars on a new project, it must not ignore environmental and human health costs and make a greater attempt to remediate past wrongs.

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