BACKGROUNDER

Plutonium Pit Facts

The US nuclear weapons program is undergoing a significant transformation. Since the end of the Cold War, the core responsibility of the national laboratories and the industries that support them has been to ensure the safety, security, and reliability of existing nuclear weapons—*not to create new ones*. Now the United States plans to spend $1.7 trillion to overhaul its entire nuclear arsenal—newly designed warheads and new bombers, missiles, and submarines to carry them—potentially locking our children and grandchildren into a future with nuclear weapons and the grave risks they pose.

These new warheads are driving the production of new plutonium "pits," the explosive cores of nuclear weapons. Construction is under way at both Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) in New Mexico and South Carolina's Savannah River Site (SRS) in order to ramp up pit production.

In 2015, Congress mandated the production of at least 80 plutonium pits per year by 2030—a goal that the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) has acknowledged they will not achieve. Yet sustaining the current US nuclear arsenal should not require *any* pit production for decades to come.

Pit production for new nuclear weapons is unnecessary.

While public rationales for the program often emphasize a need to replace aging pits, the national laboratories have offered no evidence that the nation's existing pits are anywhere near the end of their service lives. Nor is the plutonium in those pits currently at risk of age-related failure that would reduce the safety, security, or reliability of present warhead designs. The pits being manufactured at LANL and eventually SRS will not replace existing ones—they will be used for new nuclear weapons designs.

The pit program is incredibly expensive and its true cost isn't known.

The entire project is years into development and has a potential cost of tens of billions of dollars, yet there is no master schedule or official cost estimate. Congress has requested—but failed to require—such estimates before allocating more funding. The lack of rigorous oversight is particularly concerning because previous efforts to revive pit production have failed at enormous cost.

There are risks to the environment and communities.

Rushing to meet an arbitrary, unnecessary deadline heightens the risks for the workforce recruited to carry out complex, hazardous plutonium processing. Los Alamos has a troubling record of recent safety incidents, worker exposure to plutonium, and fires and floods. Remediating existing radioactive waste that already poses risks to neighboring communities should be the priority.

New nuclear weapons are not inevitable. Together we can take action to stop their production.

The Department of Energy and the NNSA are required to invite public comments on the potential environmental impacts of plutonium pit production. This is a chance to ensure important questions are raised and answered about the program's risks to communities and a more thorough look is taken at this rush job than we have seen thus far. Take our comment pledge today and we will provide you with resources to help you submit a comment when the time comes.

Scan the QR code or visit www.ucs.org/PEIScomments to sign our pledge to provide a comment opposing the unnecessary and risky production of new plutonium pits.

Want more information on how to get involved? Email Katherine Yelle at kyelle@ucs.org.

Union of Concerned Scientists

www.ucs.org/resources/plutonium-pit-production

The Union of Concerned Scientists puts rigorous, independent science into action, developing solutions and advocating for a healthy, safe, and just future.