



Savannah River Site Watch

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Contact: Tom Clements, cell 803-240-7268, srswatch@gmail.com

NNSA Implies that SRS is being Analyzed for New Nuclear Weapons Mission: Production of Plutonium “Pits,” the Core of Nuclear Weapons; Reuse of Soon-to-be Mothballed MOX Building Likely a Focus

Comments by NNSA Official at DNFSB Hearing First Indication of Review of Pit Production Capability

Columbia, SC – The Department of Energy has confirmed that it is now conducting a review to determine which DOE sites might be appropriate for location of production of plutonium “pits,” the core of nuclear weapons. SRS Watch believes that the Savannah River Site would be near the top of the list for consideration of this controversial nuclear weapons mission, with the partially completed plutonium fuel MOX facility at SRS being the facility most likely being considered for this nuclear weapons role.

At a Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (DNFSB) hearing in Los Alamos, New Mexico on June 7, a top official with the DOE’s National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) revealed that an “analysis of alternatives” for pit production is now being conducted by a special review team. *(See link to archived video below – with notation of time of McConnell’s comments about the pit production “analysis.”)*

NNSA’s James McConnell, Associate Administrator for Safety, Infrastructure and Operation” said at the DNFSB hearing that Los Alamos was being analyzed for the pit role as well as “elsewhere in the country at other sites where plutonium is already present or has been used.” McConnell said it was “premature right now to describe in more detail those individual options” that the team is reviewing, to be used for a decision in the near future.

McConnell revealed that the analysis would “very openly, very comprehensively identify all of the potential solutions to a mission need” - production of pits out of weapon-grade plutonium - and that the report, to be used for internal decision making, would be finished in “late summer.” It is unknown if the alternatives report would be publicly released but SRS Watch urges NNSA to release a public version of the analysis and engage the public in a discussion about the controversial pi-production matter.

As the MOX project at SRS is on a termination track due to congressional funding levels and Trump administration policy, formal consideration of the reuse of the building for a non-MOX “mission” has been anticipated.

SRS Watch does not believe that any decision on the pit production issue or concerning reuse of the MOX building will come quickly. “We support analysis of reuse of the unfinished MOX facility but any discussion about more plutonium import and a new nuclear weapon mission at SRS would be met with alarm,” said Tom Clements, director of SRS Watch. “Finding alternative jobs for MOX workers is something we support as the project can’t continue to drag out for the main reason of being a jobs program but pit production for nuclear weapons is not a satisfactory alternative for jobs at SRS.”

Given the former and current role of SRS in processing and storing plutonium and current Trump administration efforts to terminate construction of the Mixed Oxide Fuel Fabrication Facility (MFFF) at SRS, it is believed that NNSA is looking at the partially constructed MOX facility for other missions. Pursuit of new facilities for plutonium pit production at Los Alamos have, like MOX, have been sloppily pursued and have faced massive cost overruns, sending DOE back to the drawing board.

Congress has directed that the capacity of pit production n be ramped up to 80 pits per year over the next decade, perhaps at Los Alamos or another DOE site. Rocky Flats, DOE’s dedicated plutonium pit fabrication facility near Denver, Colorado and to which most of the 34 metric tons of weapon-grade plutonium produced in the 5 nuclear reactors at SRS was shipped, closed in the early 1990s.

SRS Watch believe that reuse of the partially completed MOX plant is inevitable. SRS Watch has heard that MOX workers were last week required by DOE to fill out a questionnaire about their level of skill and years of employment in their trade. It is believed that this signaled an intent to relocate laid-off workers as project termination is implemented in the future. SRS Watch was told in meetings three weeks ago in Washington that as the request for project termination in Fiscal Year 2018 was submitted to Congress on May 23 that steps would soon start taking place that would impact the project in Fiscal Year 2017 (ending on September 30, 2017). The rumored questionnaire could be part of that effort.

SRS Watch believe that the MOX plant has been reviewed for use as a plutonium downblending facility but DOE is refusing to respond to an SRS Watch Freedom of Information Act request for so-called CD-0 decision packet on that option. SRS Watch has also heard a rumor about tritium processing activities - for nuclear weapons - in the soon-to-be mothballed MOX plant. *(See postings of June 12 & 13, 2017 on www.srswatch.org for information on tritium-related activities at SRS – under “In the News.”)*

In January 28, 2004, DOE’s NNSA terminated an effort to locate a “Modern Pit Facility” (MPF) at SRS or another DOE site. The MPF was a massive, unneeded facility designed to produce up to 450 pits per year, for a Cold War level of nuclear weapons. SRS Watch staff and other NGOs loudly objected to the unnecessary facility in a series of Environmental Impact Statement meetings, including in October 2002 in North Augusta, SC, when a large crowd attended to speak in opposition to a new nuclear weapons mission at SRS.

According to the January 2004 news release from NNSA: “In June 2003, NNSA published a draft EIS that evaluated five potential sites for the MPF: Los Alamos and Carlsbad, NM, the Nevada Test Site, the Pantex Plant in Amarillo, TX, and the Savannah River Site in Aiken, SC.” While Los Alamos is being considered it is unknown if the Nevada Nuclear Security Site, the Pantex site or Carlsbad, NM, home of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, would be considered for pit production. Of those three sites, only

Pantex stores usable, high-quality weapon-grade plutonium, in the form of pits from dismantled weapons.

Questions posed on June 12 by SRS Watch to NNSA about the “analysis of alternatives” for pit production have gone unanswered.

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Notes:

DNFSB “Live Stream: Understanding the Safety Posture of the Plutonium Facility at Los Alamos National Laboratory, June 7, 2017:

<https://www.dnfsb.gov/public-hearings-meetings/live-stream-understanding-safety-posture-plutonium-facility-los-alamos>

DNFSB archive of June 7, 2017 video of panel with James McConnell affirming “analysis of alternatives for pit production – listen starting at about 48’30” for discussion of production of plutonium oxide for MOX or other disposal (in ARIES at Los Alamos), see starting at before 50’ for mention of “analysis of alternatives” for pit production “mission need”:

<http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/104545166>

NNSA bio on James McConnell, Associate Administrator for Safety, Infrastructure and Operation:

<https://nnsa.energy.gov/aboutus/ourleadership/mcconnell>

NNSA terminates pursuit of an EIS on a “Modern Pit Facility,” news release of January 28, 2004 – facility was planned to produce up to 450 pits/year, at SRS or another site, an overwhelming amount that was never needed:

<https://nnsa.energy.gov/mediaroom/pressreleases/nnsa-delays-modern-pit-facility-environmental-impact-statement-and-selection>

Will production of nuclear ‘pits’ leave LANL? - article in Albuquerque (New Mexico) Journal, June 12, 2017: <https://www.abqjournal.com/1016410/will-billions-for-production-of-nuclear-pits-leave-lanl.html>