“Expanding Nuclear Weapon Production is Reckless”

Tri-Valley CAREs’ executive director Marylia Kelley and Joseph Rodgers co-wrote an article appearing in The Hill, an influential DC publication, in October. The full text is as follows...

Behind closed doors, Congress is in the process of making a decision that will have a profound impact on nuclear risk levels and global security. Hanging in the balance is a decision to recklessly increase production of plutonium bomb cores or “pits.” The NDAA conference committee must not make that mistake.

Pits are the triggers for thermonuclear weapons. Currently, the United States does not manufacture plutonium pits on an industrial scale. In its fiscal 2020 budget request the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) seeks authorization to produce at least 80 plutonium pits per year by 2030 at two facilities separated by some 1,500 miles. The Senate NDAA fully funds the request. The House instead authorizes 30 pits per year, all at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in NM. Los Alamos is presently authorized to produce 20 pits annually.

Plutonium pit production at such a large scale represents a major departure from our post-Cold War nuclear weapons policy. Since the Rocky Flats Plant in CO closed in 1989 following a raid by the FBI environmental crimes unit, the United States has produced pits at an annual rate of 11 or fewer. Further, there have been no orders for newly manufactured pits in nearly a decade.

Instead, the government has been utilizing some of the approximately 20,000 plutonium pits in storage at the Pantex Plant (and elsewhere) to conduct its ongoing warhead maintenance and refurbishment programs. These pits have very long lifetimes. JASON, a DOD organized group of independent scientific experts, estimated that plutonium pits will last 100 years or more.

Clearly, the Senate NDAA is not meant to maintain the safety and reliability of the existing nuclear weapons stockpile. Instead, future production is intended to enable modified pit designs for new-design warheads, contrary to longstanding U.S. arms control objectives. Given the current moratorium on explosive testing of nuclear weapons, those pits cannot be full-scale tested or, alternatively, could prompt the United States to return to nuclear testing. This would have international proliferation consequences beyond anything we’ve seen since the most dangerous days of the Cold War.

As if to confirm that this is the ultimate plan, NNSA’s Lawrence Livermore National Lab has already begun to create a warhead, called the W87-1, that goes beyond previously-tested limits. The design that Livermore is pursuing contains a novel plutonium pit, unlike any pits in the stockpile or in storage. The W87-1 is slated to go on top of a new-design intercontinental ballistic missile, the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent. It too is controversial due to unknowns regarding its pending cost, schedule, and significant integration challenges to accommodate the new warhead.

Further, the 80 pit per year capability will not be reachable in the time frame NNSA posits, and its facilities may not be able to operate properly at that production rate. A Pentagon-funded report by the Institute for Defense Analyses in 2019 concluded that 80 pits per year is not achievable “on the schedules or budgets currently forecasted” by the NNSA. This problem is compounded by the fact that the Savannah River Site in SC, NNSA’s proposed location to produce 50 of the 80 pits annually, has been plagued with decades of cost overruns and mismanagement. Additionally, Los Alamos’s pit production capability has been crippled by safety lapses, even at the lower rate.

Placing a novel warhead design in the active nuclear weapons stockpile with a substantially untested pit is irresponsible. Rapidly increasing production at sites with spotty records compounds that error with added safety hazards. Increasing plutonium pit production to a rate of 80 or more annually is both reckless and unnecessary.

The Conference Committee can follow the Senate approach that heedlessly increases our country’s risk levels. Alternatively, it can follow a more rational approach to nuclear security by supporting the House NDAA that restricts select funding for nuclear weapons production and deployment - including for expanded plutonium pit production.
Accomplishments

7. Conducted regular meetings with the Lab, DOE and regulators on the Superfund cleanup ongoing at the Main Site and Site 300. These meetings ensure that we are kept apprised of Livermore Lab and agency plans and that we have a method of tracking (and restating when necessary) the perspectives of affected communities.

8. Collaborated with Bay Area groups and more than 150 participants to create a powerful rally and nonviolent direct action on August 6 at Livermore Lab to commemorate the 74th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

9. Participated and supported the national campaign and legislation to restrict the first use of nuclear weapons, by garnering support for the “No First Use” bills in the House and Senate and also the bills limiting the President’s ability to launch a first strike with nuclear weapons on his sole authority.

10. Provided extensive analysis of the Fiscal Year 2019 budget and 2020 budget request for nuclear weapons. These analyses covered both the overall NNSA budget request and the specific LLNL budget. This year two of our volunteers created and produced a large poster showing a pie chart of Livermore Lab’s budget request. The poster was used at venues from Cinco de Mayo to Tracy Earth Day to the Rally for Love in Livermore. TVC also spoke on budget issues at multiple venues regionally and nationally.

11. Played a leadership role in challenging the NNSA’s plan to expand plutonium bomb core production. TVC and two colleague groups launched a campaign to force the NNSA to conduct environmental review of the proposal under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and also to educate decision-makers and the public about the risks involved. Our input has been crucial because the “need” for new pit production is driven by Livermore Lab’s development of a new warhead (the W87-1). The Lab admits the W87-1 will require new-design pits – and expanded pit production to make them. TVC spoke at venues that included Congressional briefings in the Senate and the House, and a major forum in Aiken, SC near the Savannah River Site (where 50 or more of the pits would be produced). Also, our Executive Director co-authored an opinion piece in The Hill, an influential DC publication, with Joseph Rodgers titled “Expanding Nuclear Weapons Production is Reckless.” (See Page 1.)

12. Critiqued the “subcritical” nuclear tests conducted by Livermore Lab and Los Alamos in Nevada. One such test breached its containment vessel. We published blogs, articles and letters to the editor. We also expressed criticism of ongoing funding for these tests in the 2020 budget request in meetings at DC Days.

13. Pursued multi-program activities through our participation in the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability (weapons, disarmament and cleanup) and through other coalitions such as the California Environmental Justice Coalition. We have also supported multi-programmatic goals through numerous local activities, including monthly meetings, letter writing parties and more.

14. Continued to use community right to know laws to involve the public and curtail nuclear weapons, including but not limited to the Freedom of Information Act.

We could not accomplish all of this without the support of our members, volunteers, and donors like you. We hope you are proud of the work we’ve accomplished. Our staff and Board sincerely thank you for your participation. Come celebrate these accomplishments with us at our Holiday Party on December 5.

Tri-Valley CAREs invites you to a Holiday Party
Drop in 5pm - 8pm for refreshments, great food & fun
Thurs., December 5, 2019

Livermore Civic Center Library • Community Rooms A & B • 1188 South Livermore Ave.
Dear friends and supporters,

As 2019 comes to a close, I want to take a moment to say THANK YOU to the individuals and foundations that have supported us throughout the year. It is our donors who have collectively enabled our work for a more peaceful, just, and ecologically sustainable future.

It is in partnership with you that we have made genuine progress in difficult times toward our shared vision of a world free of nuclear weapons and war. To each of you, I offer my deep appreciation.

I am happy to say that in the past 12 months, 700 of you have responded to our fundraising efforts with gifts ranging from a few dollars to several thousand. Every contribution makes a difference to us.

It is because you care that we are able to celebrate another year of monitoring Livermore Lab and acting to stop new U.S. nuclear weapons and the new plutonium pits (cores) that would be used to detonate them.

This year has also seen Tri-Valley CAREs win an increase in federal funds to decontaminate Livermore’s “high risk” nuclear buildings, which pose an imminent threat of spreading radioactivity.

We have also held public events in English and Spanish in Tracy, where residents are affected by the Lab’s Site 300. Our legal expertise and community organizing has thus far staved off a proposal to detonate open-air bomb blasts at Site 300 that would be up to 10-times larger than presently allowed.

Please know that your participation in Tri-Valley CAREs has played an important role in each of these victories.

Your contributions publish our newsletter, produce reports, sponsor community meetings, translate materials into Spanish, hold peace rallies, bring young people to speak to Congress… and more.

I want to remind you, too, that the coming year will mark the 75th anniversary of the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. With colleagues, we are already hard at work planning major, innovative actions at Livermore Lab and around the Bay Area. We will stand with the Hibakusha (survivors) to demand the abolition of nuclear weapons.

As we “keep on” with our programs into a New Year, I wish you many blessings and offer gratitude from the bottom of my heart.

Peace,

Marylia Kelley
Executive Director

Here is my tax-deductible donation...

___ $50  ___ $25  ___ $100  ___ $500  ___ $1000  ___ Other

Name __________________________ Phone __________________________
Address ________________________ Email __________________________
State ____________ Zip __________ City __________________________
Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) recently honored our Executive Director as a national “2019 Visionary Leader.” Marylia Kelley accepted the award at a special reception in Washington, DC on Thursday, November 7th. The other 2019 awardees were Dr. Helen Caldicott (lifetime achievement), Kelly Campbell and Regna Merritt of the Oregon PSR chapter; and the Sunrise Movement. Recently, PSR interviewed Marylia and published the Q & A on their website. Read on…

“This year at the 2019 PSR Visionary Leaders Awards, we are delighted to honor outstanding advocates who are working to abolish nuclear weapons and to address environmental hazards to health, including the climate crisis.

Meet Marylia Kelley, who will be receiving the 2019 Visionary Leaders award for her work as an anti-nuclear advocate.

Marylia Kelley is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Tri-Valley Communities Against a Radioactive Environment (CAREs). Tri-Valley CAREs is a non-profit organization based in Livermore California that monitors the activities of the Energy Department's nuclear weapons complex.

PSR caught up with Kelley to ask her about how she came to do this work, what inspires her, and her advice for young people just starting to get involved in advocacy.

Q: What first drew you to this type of work?

In a way, I was drawn to this work as a child. I am from the generation that practiced "duck-and-cover" drills in the classroom when the air raid sirens sounded each month. In sixth grade, I was assigned to draw the window blinds before getting under my desk. I knew that this was a futile exercise, and I also knew that it was not okay to say so out loud. I closed the blinds and crouched under my desk, hands locked behind my neck.

I was drawn to this work, too, by the Cuban Missile Crisis, when I came home from school to find my mother sitting on the kitchen floor putting extra flour and sugar and dried rice into a second set of bins, as if that could save her family. I knew I wasn’t supposed to talk about it. I also knew this was the only thing my mom could think of, and I didn’t want to take whatever small comfort it offered away from her.

I moved to Livermore, California in 1976. At first I only knew that there was a super-secret government lab that employed a lot of people in my new hometown. No one spoke about it. Slowly, I came to realize that the Livermore Lab was one of two sites that design every nuclear weapon in the U.S. arsenal. After some years of reflection and study, I came to the conclusion that nuclear weapons were immoral and that their use by anyone under any circumstance could never be justified. Now an adult, I felt a responsibility to speak out. In 1983, when I was invited to help create a homegrown nuclear watchdog group in Livermore, I said, "Yes."

Q: How have the health impacts of nuclear weapons-related policies informed your work?

The health and environmental impacts of nuclear weapons have always been part of Tri-Valley CAREs' work. When we founded the group in 1983, the major arguments against nuclear weapons involved their immorality (humanitarian impacts) and their economic injustice (guns vs. butter).

As Livermore residents, including some Lab workers, we wanted to find out if there were environmental and health impacts stemming from the development of nuclear weapons. We knew the devastation of an exploded nuclear weapon. But, we asked, what about the unexploded nuclear bomb?

As a journalist, I came to Tri-Valley CAREs with knowledge of how to use the Freedom of Information Act and related skills. Soon we were combing government records. The accounts we read of accidents, spills, and leaks at Livermore Lab surpassed by far the expectations we had held in our minds. Even our co-founding members who worked there were astonished.

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From our early days, researching, writing and speaking on the connection between nuclear weapons development and environmental and health harms has been central to our approach. Tri-Valley CAREs has won operational changes at Livermore Lab and other sites in the nuclear weapons complex even as we also achieved victories that stopped specific weapons programs and influenced national policy.

Q: What would be your advice to a young person just starting to get involved in this type of work?

Tri-Valley CAREs has an internship program and we attract both high school and university interns. I often advise that choosing to pursue nuclear disarmament is meaningful, consequential and fulfilling. And, it is never boring!

At Tri-Valley CAREs, we try to demonstrate these tenets by giving interns a chance to experience more than one aspect of our work. Some may start their internship with our staff attorney helping Livermore Lab workers made ill by on-the-job exposures to obtain compensation. Others may work with us on the Superfund cleanup of toxic and radioactive wastes from nuclear activities that have leached into our community aquifer. Still others begin by studying nuclear policy, with a focus on the weapons Livermore is designing. Some come to Washington, D.C. with us to conduct advocacy in administration and congressional offices. By the conclusion of the internship, we strive to have given each person hands-on experience—and in the field(s) of highest interest to them. That is more life changing than any piece of advice I might give!

Q: When it comes to changes or advances in nuclear weapons policies, what is your greatest hope for the coming year?

Internationally, I hope to see the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons achieve the ratification by 50 nations necessary for the treaty to enter into force. This may take two years rather than one, but I do see it happening.

Nationally, I hope to stymie many of the nuclear programs that were in the Trump administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review. One priority is to prevent deployment of Trump's so-called "low yield" submarine-launched nuclear warhead. That decision may occur in a matter of weeks. Another clear priority is to stop Livermore Lab's development of a new warhead with novel design features intended to replace the land-based W78. Called the W87-1, Livermore is developing the warhead to include an untested plutonium pit (core) unlike any in the stockpile. This is pushing the bad policy decision to expand plutonium pit production. It is likewise a priority to turn that around in the coming year.

Locally, I hope that the "valley air district" will reject Livermore Lab's permit application to conduct outdoor bomb tests at its Site 300 with 10-times more high explosive power than the Lab can presently use. These blasts would loft 121-listed hazardous materials into the open air.

Q: Who or what is your greatest inspiration to do the work that you do?

Wow, I have so many inspirations that I cannot fully answer this question in the allotted time or space. Always and forever, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is one of my guiding inspirations. I should also note that one of Tri-Valley CAREs early events involved a showing of Dr. Helen Caldicott’s video “If You Love This Planet.” Very inspiring! I am also inspired by all of my colleagues who work so hard and so creatively every day to change U.S. policy and create the foundation for a world without nuclear weapons. We are a team, and that inspires me every day. Finally, I remain inspired by a “meme” from way back in the day that envisioned grandchildren asking us, “Grandma, why did they used to have nuclear weapons?” This reminds me that nuclear weapons are crazy and irrational, and “Why?” is the logical question.”
Some 2019 Accomplishments (We’ve Been Busy!)

2019 has provided Tri-Valley CAREs with ample opportunity to work toward our strategic priorities and mission. It’s been a busy year! We thought we would use some space in our final newsletter of the year to step back and look at some of our accomplishments. It’s remarkable what a (relatively) small group of committed people can accomplish when they work hard and put their minds to it. Here are some of the highlights. We:

1. Won a “Visionary Leader” Award from Physicians for Social Responsibility in Washington DC honoring our Executive Director Marylia Kelley for Tri-Valley CAREs’ work to abolish nuclear weapons and to address environmental and health hazards. (Check out the interview with her in this newsletter.)

2. Sponsored community meetings in Tracy on the Site 300 Superfund cleanup (and the bomb blast proposal) in March and November 2019. The meetings attracted new people including Spanish-speaking residents who had not been involved before our events.

3. Continued coordinating an advisory committee of Tracy residents to provide input on future Site 300 cleanup activities. Our bi-lingual community organizer also conducted outreach in Tracy and surrounding communities throughout the year.

4. Tracked the 2019 cleanup budgets and the 2020 budget request, and helped assure appropriate funding for the Main Site and Site 300 Superfund cleanup programs. One notable outcome is that our advocacy at the federal level led to funding for LLNL to begin to address dangerously contaminated (aka “high risk”) abandoned buildings on-site.

5. Conducted education and advocacy during “DC Days 2019” by meeting with the current Administration and Congress regarding the Superfund cleanup. As noted above, the TVC team advocated for funds to D&D the “high-risk” facilities. We also met with three local members of Congress and are following up with Rep. Josh Harder who told us he has sent a letter to the Secretary of Energy about the bigger bomb blasts at Site 300. We also met with Rep. Harder in the District.

6. Devoted substantial effort and time to the Lab’s proposal to increase the strength and frequency of open-air bomb blasts at Site 300. Our work on this issue is incorporated into the outreach, Tracy community meetings and “DC Days” items noted above.

(Staying tuned!)