

Pentagon More Than Doubles Cost Estimate for B61 Nuclear Bomb

According to a new estimate from the Pentagon, the life-extension program for the B61 nuclear bomb will now cost roughly \$10 billion, two-and-a-half times the original cost proposed.

Sen. Diane Feinstein, D-Calif., who chairs the Senate Appropriations energy and water development subcommittee, said she was briefed on the bomb's new estimate July 23.

Variants of the B61 bomb have been in the U.S. nuclear weapon inventory since the late 1960s. The latest life-extension program is aimed at updating the bomb to make it safer to keep in the nuclear stockpile for years to come.

The \$10 billion cost estimate comes from DoD's Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation (CAPE) office, which is responsible for conducting independent cost studies of weapon programs. Its analysis of the program's cost is \$2 billion more than a new estimate from the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), Feinstein said.

Revising its previous estimates, NNSA now says the program will cost \$8 billion, which is "double the cost of the original" \$4 billion estimate, Feinstein told reporters after a July 25 subcommittee hearing.

CAPE and NNSA "had some disagreements on assumptions," a staffer for Feinstein said.

The escalating cost of the B61 nuclear bomb is just the latest example at NNSA of costs climbing well above what was originally proposed.

For example, cost estimates for a new plutonium laboratory, known as the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement (CMRR) facility, have grown from \$600 million to \$6 billion.

These programs seem unable to stay within their original budget confines, with costs going up exponentially, Feinstein said. "We have to find a way to stop this from happening and that's what we are now trying to do."

She said she has asked the NNSA to provide regular reports to keep the subcommittee updated on any problems that may be driving costs up. The subcommittee would like NNSA to solve problems more quickly "before they are just left and allowed to continue to grow," Feinstein said.

Testifying before the subcommittee, retired Marine Corps Gen. James Cartwright, former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said, “We have to get our arms around how to cost these life-extension programs, because we’re going to do them for the next 50 years.”

While the stated goal of the United States is to reduce its nuclear weapons stockpile to zero, that’s unlikely to happen during that timeframe, Cartwright said.

“We have to find a way to understand what it costs; what the implications of a large inventory are versus a small inventory; and do a good business case,” Cartwright said.

Cartwright, along with Thomas Pickering, the former undersecretary for political affairs at the State Department, appeared before the subcommittee to discuss a recent report, which they conducted along with other U.S. officials, that recommends reducing today’s roughly 5,000 nuclear weapons to 900.

“This would represent a steep (80 percent) reduction from the current U.S. arsenal, but it would not be a small force, nor a humble force designed for minimal deterrence,” Cartwright said in his written testimony.

Such reductions should not be made unilaterally, but through a negotiated agreement with Russia, Cartwright said.

The report from Global Zero, a group committed to eventually eliminating nuclear weapons, also recommends the United States move from a nuclear triad to a dyad, eliminating land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) from the U.S. inventory.

Under today’s nuclear triad, the United States can use bomber aircraft, submarines or ICBMs to deliver nuclear weapons. Because ICBMs have to fly over Russia and China no matter what their intended target is, they are unsuitable except for the most unlikely scenario: a large-scale nuclear war with Russia, according to Cartwright.

Under Global Zero’s proposal, 720 of the 900 remaining nuclear weapons would be allocated to ballistic-missile submarines. Today, the Navy maintains 12 such submarines, but the Global Zero report recommends reducing that number to 10. The remaining 180 nuclear weapons would be provided to the Air Force’s B-2 bomber fleet.

These reductions would save \$100 billion to \$120 billion over the first 10 years in cost avoidance, Cartwright said.

Keith Payne, who oversaw nuclear weapons policy at the Pentagon from 2002 to 2003, disagreed with the Global Zero report. The United States needs more flexible options than this reduced strategic force would allow, he said.

Keeping only 900 nuclear weapons in its inventory would leave the United States vulnerable to its opponents, he told lawmakers.

<http://www.defensenews.com/article/20120725/DEFREG02/307250004/Pentagon-More-Than-Doubles-Cost-Estimate-B61-Nuclear-Bomb?odyssey=tab%7Ctopnews%7Ctext%7CFRONTPAGE>