

## "Expanding Nuclear Weapon Production is Reckless"

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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 in Texas 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 at Pantex. The W87-1 is slated 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.

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