

Tri-Valley CAREs Sounds Warning on Plutonium Expansion in Hill Meetings and “Pit” Briefing Hosted in the Senate

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Tri-Valley CAREs’ Executive Director Marylia Kelley headed to Washington, DC in late January to meet with colleague organizations and policymakers to make the case that expanded plutonium pit production will fuel a growing new nuclear arms race. Kelley and colleagues also shared internal National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) and other documents showing the plan is prohibitively expensive and fraught with technical challenges.

Jay Coghlan, Executive Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico and TVC Senior Policy Consultant Kathy Crandall Robinson joined Marylia for a dozen meetings with congressional offices and Administration officials.

We had the opportunity to speak with key new congressional staff and offices, and to discuss strategy with offices where we have already developed strong relationships. For example, we had a great meeting in Congressman John Garamendi’s office (D-CA-3) and are pleased to report that he remains committed to challenging expanded pit production. We also had very fruitful meetings with Democratic staff for both the Senate and House Armed Services Committees and others.

A highlight of the DC trip was a policy briefing and discussion, *“The Pitfalls of Plutonium Pits”*, organized by Stephen Young of the Union of Concerned Scientists and hosted by Chris Hanson, Democratic professional staff on the Senate Energy and Water Appropriations subcommittee, through which the nuclear weapons budget must pass. Special thanks are due to Chris Hanson for his insightful participation - and for securing the Dirksen Senate hearing room for the briefing.

Even with a declared snow emergency that shut down Congress, twenty people participated in the briefing and lively discussion that followed, including five key congressional staff and good representation from the DC arms control and disarmament community.

Marylia Kelley started off the panel presentations by noting that although plans for expanded pit production are “not on the 6 O’clock news” they are nonetheless devastating to arms control and disarmament. She especially emphasized how pit production is intertwined with planned new weapons development and pressures to resume nuclear explosive testing in Nevada.

Plans to produce at least 80 pits per year at two facilities (Los Alamos and Savannah River Site) would ensure that the United States is in the nuclear weapons production business forever and able to produce pits for warheads with new military capabilities. Marylia spoke to the ways in which new, industrial-scale pit production would provide the means for weapons designers to

add new bombs and warheads to the arsenal, moving the U.S. further from the disarmament we seek and into uncharted new weapon design territory fraught with peril. Production of new-design pits for new warheads creates scientific uncertainty as these novel additions don't trace back to a "pedigree" of already-tested designs. This uncertainty will create pressure to resume nuclear testing in Nevada. It is clear that other nuclear-armed nations would follow suit.

Marylina further explained that pit production is being driven by the development of the W78 warhead replacement (to sit atop a new ICBM) now to be called the W87-1 warhead, which is being designed at Livermore Lab to be markedly different than its namesake. One key change is that this new warhead is being designed with a novel untested shape for its plutonium pit (thus requiring expanded pit production).

If this name-change game for the new warhead seems confusing, it is. For instance, there are already W87 warheads in the arsenal that have been successfully refurbished without changing their design. For simplicity, however, we will call this new-design beast the W87-1 warhead because that is the name NNSA has chosen for it.

Marylina closed her presentation noting the necessity to terminate this plan quickly before it further undermines arms control and disarmament and puts our public health, environmental safety and national treasury at risk.

Jay Coghlan's presentation emphasized the ways in which NNSA's plans for pit production run afoul of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Jay covered the value of NEPA's technical analysis and public participation elements. Jay discussed the importance of congressional and public insistence on the crucial need and legal imperative for NNSA to conduct a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) analyzing the impacts of expanded pit production and alternatives to current plans. He noted the historical precedence of previous pit expansion plans that were defeated with pressure related to previous PEIS activities.

Longstanding Tri-Valley CAREs members likely recall our group's role in fighting off the Modern Pit Facility and the Complex 2030 "Consolidated Plutonium Center" to name two of the former proposals. As Jay noted in his closing remarks, we must prepare for a similar struggle and with the lever of the law (i.e., NEPA) we can succeed again.

Also presenting on the panel were Andy Weber, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear, Chemical & Biological Defense and staff director of the Nuclear Weapons Council, and Professor Steve Fetter, former Assistant Director in the White House Office of Science & Technology Policy. On the basis of informed, insider analysis, both men challenged the "need" for large-scale pit production to address the requirements of the current nuclear weapons stockpile. Each noted that the W78 could be retired as an alternative to creating this new, mash-up W87-1 warhead. Each offered a variation on the fundamental question, why not rely on the existing W87 rather than put a new design into the stockpile alongside it?

In the very good question and answer and discussion that followed the presentations, we heard a plea for more basic education and simple arguments making the case against pit production. We recognized the need for further education about additional pit production issues, and we noted questions that Congress and NGOs should raise, including:

- Why is this level of production necessary given the approximately 20,000 existing pits stored at the Pantex facility that could be reused? What role could the proven technique of “pit reuse” play if we foreswore new designs?
- How will we afford this and hope to meet all of the technical challenges, when NNSA’s preliminary estimate for expanded pit production tops \$40 billion? How should we consider that many complicated NNSA projects go over-budget by factors of 2 to 10 - and some, like MOX at SRS and ignition at NIF at LLNL, never work as intended?
- Why do we want to support this build-up of the nuclear arsenal and risk a return to nuclear explosive testing? What role could further arms control and disarmament play?

Tri-Valley CAREs plans for follow up include a series of easy-to-read fact sheets and messages particularly aimed at new congressional staff on key committees. We will post our new fact sheets on our website and link as well to other materials crafted by colleague organizations.

In addition, as we receive more information about next year’s budget request at NNSA and plans around its “plutonium strategy,” we will urge questions from congressional offices at key opportunities. We will also continue to reach out to arms control and disarmament colleague organizations in Washington, DC to integrate understanding of pit production and related nuclear weapons policy issues into their work.

Pit production and related issues will be featured as part of the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability DC Days, May 20-22 which will include approximately 75 participants from nuclear weapons complex sites with approximately 100 congressional office and administration meetings. Tri-Valley CARE’s will have a leadership role in shaping the education and strategy related to new nukes and pit production for DC Days. With current federal budget process delays, raising issues about pit production plans and costs in late May in DC will be particularly timely.

In sum, while Tri-Valley CAREs, Union of Concerned Scientists, and Nuclear Watch New Mexico made enormous strides in DC last month, **your future participation in stopping expanded plutonium pit production is essential** to the ultimate success of the project.

Stay tuned, check our website for new information, come to our monthly meetings for great discussion and action ideas, and join us for DC Days if your schedule allows (space is limited; timely RSVP is essential to marylia@earthlink.net or marylia@trivalleycares.org).