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PRESS RELEASE

Potential Accidents at New Plutonium Bomb Factory Would Violate Radiation Protection Standards for the Public

Bomb Plant Would Undermine Nuclear Test Moratorium and Test Ban Treaty According to Independent Analysis

Proposed Large Plant Would Also Violate Internal Radiation Safety Guidelines for Workers

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Takoma Park, Maryland, July 16, 2003: More than one-fourth of the potential accidents analyzed for a new facility designed to manufacture plutonium triggers for the U.S. nuclear arsenal would violate the DOE's own guideline for radiation exposure to the public, some by as much as 400%, according to an independent analysis of government documents. In addition, the accidents analyzed by the government represent only a fraction of possible scenarios, thus preventing any clear understanding of the overall risk posed to the public by the facility.

These conclusions are based on a review of the May 2003 draft Department of Energy (DOE) Environmental Impact Statement on its proposed Modern Pit Facility (MPF) conducted by the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (IEER) in Takoma Park, Maryland. The plutonium "pits" to be made at the proposed facility are the triggers that initiate the explosion in modern multi-stage thermonuclear warheads and are similar to the plutonium explosive in the bomb that the United States used to destroy Nagasaki during the Second World War.

Sites under consideration for the DOE's Modern Pit Facility include the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) and Carlsbad, both in New Mexico; the Savannah River Site near Aiken, South Carolina; the Nevada Test Site, 60 miles from Las Vegas; and the Pantex Plant in Amarillo, Texas. At three of these sites (LANL, Carlsbad, and the Pantex Plant), one-third to one-half of the accidents analyzed for a plant capable of producing 450 pits per year (ppy) would lead to exposures in excess of the DOE guidelines for a member of the public. The maximum allowed exposure to a person offsite under the DOE guideline is 25 rem, which is 50 times the annual exposure limit to the population allowed from the normal operation of nuclear facilities.

The most serious accident considered would lead to exposures from twice to nearly four times the DOE guideline depending upon the site.

The DOE document claims that once a specific site is chosen, it will then determine how to bring it into compliance with the regulations. "It is unacceptable that the DOE has proposed a facility that would violate its own guidelines," notes Dr. Brice Smith, a research scientist at IEER. "Without knowing the actual exposures that the DOE will eventually allow at each location following an accident, it is impossible to accurately compare the risk they pose to the public."

Additionally, the DOE report analyzes only a subset of the potential accidents that may occur at an MPF. Because the total risk from independent accidents is cumulative, the draft report offers no basis for determining the actual threat to the public at any of the proposed sights for pit production .

However, it is not just accidents at an MPF that have the potential for serious human consequences. "Normal operation of a 450 pit per year facility would lead to average worker exposures in excess of the internal DOE recommended administrative standard at nuclear facilities," notes IEER President Dr. Arjun Makhijani. In addition, an examination of the data tables presented in the draft report indicate that the DOE estimates that over a 40 year operating period roughly 9 workers will die due to radiation induced cancer. "This proposed plutonium explosives factory will be dangerous for its employees," concluded Dr. Makhijani.

The Modern Pit Facility is supposedly part of the DOE's "Stockpile Stewardship Program" to maintain the safety and reliability of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. But no problems that would materially affect the reliability of plutonium pits in the current U.S. arsenal are identified in the draft report or in the scientific literature. On the contrary, the results of current research indicate that aging of pits affects neither the safety nor the reliability of nuclear weapons. "Given the remarkably consistent and positive findings of studies concerning the lack of age-related damage in plutonium, there is no scientific justification for the claim that pits needs to be replaced anytime in the foreseeable future," concluded Dr. Smith. "We have determined from our analysis that even the 20 pit per year capacity that the DOE hopes to have developed at Los Alamos National Laboratory by 2007 is likely to be unnecessary, to say nothing of a massive new facility," adds Dr. Makhijani.

In its discussion of the case for the MPF, the DOE document wraps itself in the cloak of "classified analyses." In response, Dr. Makhijani noted that "following the closure of the Rocky Flats pit production facility in 1989 due to violations of health, safety, and environmental laws, the Department of Energy assured the public that classified analysis proved national security was at risk if the complex remained closed, however the country has done quite well without Rocky Flats for over a decade."

"Given the lack of any need for the MPF to maintain the current stockpile, the likely reason for its development will be to manufacture new pit designs for new types of weapons," says Dr. Smith. "The production of new weapons such as the 'mini-nuke' and the 'bunker-buster' is a dangerous drift towards usable nuclear weapons that is in violation of U.S. commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty," adds Dr. Makhijani. Dr. Makhijani also noted "it is highly

unlikely, given current certification procedures, that pits of new designs would be mass manufactured for incorporation into the U.S. arsenal unless they were fully tested." This consideration raises the likelihood of an end to the current U.S. nuclear test moratorium and the collapse of the international Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

The final public hearing concerning plans to construct the new pit manufacturing facility is scheduled for today in Washington, D.C. Previous hearings have been held at locations near each of the five proposed sites throughout the summer.

It is the conclusion of the IEER analysis that the "No Action Alternative" is the correct choice and that plans for the Modern Pit Facility should be scrapped.

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