

Government Data Projects Worker Cancer Deaths at New Plutonium Bomb Factory

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Press Release

“Modern Pit Facility” Would Also Violate U.S. Nuclear Nonproliferation Commitments

No Scientific Basis for Replacing Plutonium “Pits” in Existing Nuclear Arsenal

Takoma Park, Maryland, June 26, 2003: A new plant designed to manufacture [plutonium](#) triggers for the U.S. nuclear arsenal is likely to cause several fatal cancers among its workforce, according to an independent analysis of newly released government documents.

The conclusion is based on a review of the May 2003 draft Department of Energy (DOE) Environmental Impact Statement on its proposed Modern Pit Facility by the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (IEER) in Takoma Park, Maryland. The [plutonium](#) “pits” that trigger the initial explosion in modern multi-stage nuclear warheads are similar to the [plutonium](#) explosive in the bomb that the United States used to destroy Nagasaki during World War II.

According to IEER, the data tables in the DOE document project that the proposed plant to manufacture 450 [plutonium](#) pits per year would expose its workers to radiation sufficient to cause one fatal cancer every four and a half years. That would total about nine cancer deaths over the [plutonium](#) pit factory’s 40-year anticipated life. DOE projections of collective radiation dose to workers vary with projected plant size.

“This proposed [plutonium](#) explosives factory will be dangerous for its employees,” concluded IEER President Dr. Arjun Makhijani. “The Department of Energy’s own radiation dose estimates indicate that several workers would die of cancer over the life of the plant as a result of their exposure. It seems unconscionable to propose to build such a risky and unneeded facility when the DOE is only just beginning to compensate workers that it put at risk during the Cold War after fifty years of denial of harm.”

The DOE admitted in the year 2000 that over half a million workers had been put in harm’s way during the Cold War because of exposure to [radioactivity](#) at its nuclear weapons plants. Congress put a complex compensation program into place that year. Thousands of frustrated workers are yet to be compensated.

“This seems like a return to the bad old days of the Cold War, when public health was put at risk in an



irrational pursuit of vast nuclear arsenals,” added Lisa Ledwidge, IEER’s Outreach Director. “It is lamentable that DOE does not clearly state that several cancer deaths would result from the operation of the [plutonium](#) pit factory. One has to calculate that from the fine print in the tables: the text is misleading and makes it seem that workers would be safe.”

The Modern Pit Facility is supposed to be a part of 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 EIS and or other literature. On the contrary the data indicate that aging of pits affects neither safety nor reliability.

“There is currently no scientific basis for claiming that pit replacement is required for safety or reliability of the existing arsenal,” said Dr. Makhijani. “Even the 20 pit per year capacity that the DOE plans to have at Los Alamos National Laboratory by 2007 may be superfluous, to say nothing of a huge new plant.”

The proposed plant could also be used to make [plutonium](#) cores for new bomb designs. Two new types have been proposed by the U.S. government: “mini-nukes” – which could be as much as 1,000 times bigger than the one Timothy McVeigh used to destroy the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City – and “bunker busters.”

“Building large numbers of new bombs that could be used in nuclear war-fighting seems to be the real purpose of this plant,” said Dr. Makhijani. “This is a dangerous drift towards usable nuclear weapons that is in violation of U.S. commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Using nuclear bombs to attack runways or bunkers would likely kill large numbers of civilians and create huge amounts of fallout.”

Fallout from nuclear weapons testing increased cancer risks for many people in the United States, including thousands of armed forces personnel who assisted in the U.S. nuclear testing program. World War II occupation troops in Hiroshima and Nagasaki also faced increased risks.

“Thousands of atomic veterans are being denied compensation even though U.S. government testing and use of nuclear bombs put them at risk,” said Ms. Ledwidge. “But instead of focusing on justice for ill veterans, the government is wasting money preparing for a dangerous new plan to build usable nuclear weapons, possibly even in a pre-emptive war. That’s not only the wrong message to governments abroad. It’s an injustice for people in the United States.”

The United States has named several countries as potential nuclear weapon targets, including Iran, North Korea, Syria, and Libya. “Nuclear war-fighting strategies and nuclear threats are likely to spur proliferation,” said Dr. Makhijani. “For instance, India’s nuclear bomb-building advocates received a great political boost when the United States threatened India during its war with Pakistan in 1971 by sending a U.S. nuclear-armed aircraft carrier into the Bay of Bengal in a ‘tilt’ towards Pakistan.” India conducted its first nuclear explosive test in 1974.

Sites being considered for DOE’s Modern Pit Facility include the Los Alamos National Laboratory 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. Public hearings about plans to

construct the new [plutonium](#) manufacturing are scheduled for communities near all the target sites and in Washington, D.C. during the early summer months.

Public meetings on the draft EIS:

Pantex Site — June 26, 2003 7:00 p.m.- 10:00 p.m. College Union Building, Oak Room Amarillo College, Washington St. Campus 24th and Jackson Streets Amarillo, TX 79178 (806) 371-5100	Los Alamos Site — July 1, 2003 7:00 p.m.- 10:00 p.m. Gold Hotel Highway 84/285 Pojoaque, NM 87544 (505) 455-0515	Savannah River Site — July 7, 2003 6:00 p.m.- 10:00 p.m. North Augusta Community Center 495 Brookside Avenue North Augusta, SC 29841 (803) 441-4290
Carlsbad Site, NM — June 30, 2002 6:00 p.m.- 10:00 p.m. U.S. Department of Energy Carlsbad Area Office 4021 National Parks Highway Carlsbad, NM 88220 (505) 234-7227	Nevada Site — July 2, 2003 7:00 p.m.- 10:00 p.m. University of Nevada Las Vegas 4504 Maryland Parkway Student Union Building Room 201 Las Vegas, NV 89154 (702) 895-4449	Washington, D.C. — July 16, 2003 10:00 a.m.- 1:00 p.m. U.S. Department of Energy 1000 Independence Avenue, SW Room 1E-245 Washington, DC 20585 (202) 586-0821

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