

Ongoing nuclear weapons production in the United States takes place under the Life Extension Program (LEP.)

Life Extension Program

In the late-1980's the Department of Energy's (DOE) Rocky Flats Plant, which produced plutonium pits for nuclear warheads, was shut down after a raid by the FBI. Eventually, the plant was shuttered, disrupting the U.S. capacity for producing new warheads.

In the mid-1990's the focus of many in the weapons establishment shifted to concerns that the current nuclear arsenal, no longer being replenished with new warheads, would have to serve a longer life than planned. Thus the Stockpile Stewardship and Maintenance (SSM) Program was born. SSM's mission included periodic surveillance and assessment of warheads and warhead components to make sure they would still "function as designed" if they were ever used.

The Life Extension Program grew out of the Stockpile Stewardship program. Under the LEP, warheads are brought to the Pantex Plant in Texas where they are partially disassembled and component pieces replaced. Thermonuclear secondaries, the components responsible for the main explosion, are returned to their place of origin (Y12 in Oak Ridge, Tennessee) for refurbishment.

Under the LEP, weapons systems are being upgraded one at a time. Upgrades on every W87 and B61s in the US arsenal have been completed, and LEPs are slated to begin on the W76.

Given the huge price tag of the LEP, \$234 million in FY 2008, it is worth noting that no documentation has ever been made public demonstrating the program is needed to maintain the nuclear arsenal in good working order. NNSA's assertions of a need to manufacture new plutonium pits to replace aging pits were debunked through a study that found pits were reliable for at least 80 years.

Current Status of the LEP

At the Y12 Plant in Oak Ridge, the work performed on secondaries is called a "Life Extension Upgrade." "Upgrade," suggests that the Life Extension Program is not merely maintaining the U.S. arsenal in its current state, but may actually be making substantive changes to it. This suspicion was born out last year when it was revealed that LEP upgrades to the W76 would result in a warhead with new military capabilities, so different from the W76 that its nomenclature is modified, the new W76 is the W76-1. The modifications include-e, among other things, the installation of a new arming, fuzing and firing mechanism. A new \$3 billion Uranium Processing Facility is slated to be built at Oak Ridge to support LEPs.

New Bombs or Not?

The DOE recently completed a national public review of plans to rebuild the nuclear weapons complex. Under "Complex Transformation" new production facilities would be built to continue U.S. capability to manufacture new nuclear weapons. The LEP program would continue under this rubric. Building new weapons and upgrading the old arsenal, even if disguised as "life extension" or "stockpile stewardship" undercuts U.S. global nonproliferation goals.

The Curatorship Alternative

The advantage of a “curatorship” program over the current Complex Transformation plan and the Life Extension Program is that curatorship is consistent with U.S. international goals. The others place the enduring upgraded arsenal at irreconcilable odds with the policy of security through nonproliferation.

Curatorship would maintain the arsenal safely and reliably while it awaits dismantlement. Such a program would:

- Increase U.S. security by reducing reliance on nuclear weapons
- Reduce costs of maintaining and deploying an enduring nuclear arsenal
- Free up resources at national labs to address other significant challenges
- Provide global leadership toward a nuclear weapons free world
- Support the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty

The Right Questions

What facilities, infrastructure, personnel and activities are required to safely and securely make the journey to a nuclear weapons free world? How can those facilities be built and operated in a way that assures they are not secretly being used to produce nuclear weapons? What resources exist, both domestic and global, that can be employed to achieve a secure curatorship?

These questions and others like them would inform a true transformation of the weapons complex and establish a benchmark for the U.S. and other countries on the road to a nuclear weapons free future.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Halt all Complex Transformation decisions pending completion of a Nuclear Posture Review by the Obama Administration and the completion of the bipartisan Congressional Commission’s review of U.S. nuclear policy.
- An independent review of NNSA claims of the “need” for Life Extension should be completed
- The U.S. should renew its commitment to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty prior to the 2010 review.

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