

Commentary: SC plutonium pit plan distracts from our most pressing threat

By Victor T. Volskay Jr.
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The federal government has unveiled plans to construct a plutonium pit manufacturing plant at the Savannah River Site near Aiken, a decision the League of Women Voters of South Carolina opposes.

A plutonium pit is the bowling ball-size radioactive core used to trigger the detonation of a nuclear warhead. The proposed Savannah River Plutonium Processing Facility would have the capability of producing an additional 50 plutonium pits per year by 2030, and it would bring environmental concerns such as the generation of mixed (radioactive and nonradioactive) hazardous waste. The S.C. Environmental Law Project, which has sued the Department of Energy and the National Nuclear Security Administration, says these agencies have failed to undertake a new or supplemental programmatic environmental impact statement as required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

An impact statement would evaluate the direct, long-range and cumulative environmental impacts of producing pits across multiple DOE sites, including SRS and a site at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. It's impossible for the Energy Department to make an informed decision about its plans or assess alternatives that would reduce or eliminate the significant risks to human and environmental health posed by the project until an impact statement is conducted.

The plan by the two agencies to expand the U.S. plutonium pit manufacturing capacity and increase annual production of plutonium pits from 10 to 80 in eight years sends a troubling message. Such a rapid increase suggests a corresponding increase in the production of nuclear warheads.

The League of Women Voters of South Carolina supports arms control measures that reduce the risk of war, increase global security and ensure that our existing nuclear arsenal is supported and maintained in line with U.S. national security. Expanding nuclear warhead production capabilities and targeting a 700% increase in plutonium pit production could reignite a nuclear arms race between the United States and its potential adversaries.

Then there is the cost. The league is concerned that the actual cost to construct the processing facility would be significantly greater than the current estimate. According to the Energy Department's fiscal year 2022 budget request, the initial projection to repurpose the failed SRS Mixed Oxide Fuel Fabrication Facility for the production of 50 plutonium pits was \$4.59 billion. The most recent projection more than doubled, to \$11.1 billion, with contingency costs still to be determined. Tellingly, a caveat in the budget states that achieving the production goal of 50 plutonium pits per year in 2030 is unlikely.

Lastly, we would argue that the threat of nuclear war, while existential, is not the single or most pressing threat to humanity, or our security. The doctrine of mutually assured destruction and treaties to reduce nuclear arms have reduced the threat of nuclear warfare and achieved relative stability for more than

six decades. So other factors should get more attention as we work to protect our national security, not least the existential threat of climate change.

U.S. security agencies, including the Pentagon and Department of Homeland Security, have warned that climate change is a threat multiplier for conflicts over food and water and that dislocation and migration will be exacerbated as the world warms. In September, a World Bank report projected that climate change could force more than 200 million people to move in the next three decades due to water scarcity, reduced crop productivity and rising sea levels.

The current rate of human greenhouse gas emissions and global warming is unsustainable, and the window to limit global warming to 1.5 to 2.0 degrees Celsius by 2050, the cap needed to avoid the worst consequences of climate change, is closing rapidly. Arguably, without urgent action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the increasingly dire consequences of global warming will pose a greater threat to our national security than nuclear war.

In turn, the risk of a renewed nuclear arms race would heighten geopolitical tensions during a time when unprecedented international cooperation will be required to mitigate the certain and catastrophic consequences of future climate change. For this reason, Energy Department resources committed to construction of the processing facility would be better spent on research and investment into renewable energy, sequestration of carbon dioxide emissions and other efforts to reduce human greenhouse gas emissions.

Ultimately, combating climate change with haste should be our highest national security priority.

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