

DOE Admits Design Problems with Controversial New Plutonium Bomb Plant at Savannah River Site, Cost Soars to \$25 Billion

Anticipated DOE Funding Requests for SRS Plutonium Pit Plant, Key to New Nuclear Warheads, to Hit \$9 Billion Over the Next 5 Years

COLUMBIA, SC, US, March 14, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- On the heels of releasing information that the design of proposed plutonium bomb facility at the Savannah River Site in South Carolina “continued to trend negative,” the Department of Energy has admitted in budget documents released this week that the cost could hit a staggering \$25 billion.



Savannah River Site Watch

SRS Watch is a non-profit public-interest organization located in Columbia, South Carolina, that monitors policies and programs of the U.S. Department of Energy, with a focus on the Savannah River Site located near Aiken, SC.

The massive cost increase, rising from an estimated \$11.1 billion in June 2021, was reflected in DOE’s National Nuclear Security Administration’s (NNSA) Fiscal Year 2025 [budget request to Congress](#), posted on March 11, 2024. Like all complex DOE projects, such as the plutonium fuel

(MOX) project canceled at SRS in 2018, significant delays and large cost overruns related to design and technical problems are standard and, as congressional oversight is minimal, tend to get worse over time. The abandoned MOX building, now being stripped of all costly installations, is proposed to be converted into the pit plant.

“

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Tom Clements, Director, SRS Watch

If it ever operates, the SRS Plutonium Bomb Plant - which DOE calls the more innocuous “SRS Plutonium Processing Facility” - would be key in fabricating the plutonium pits, or cores, for both new and existing U.S. nuclear warheads. The weight of a spherical, hollow pit is classified but it’s around a few kilograms of plutonium (much of which was

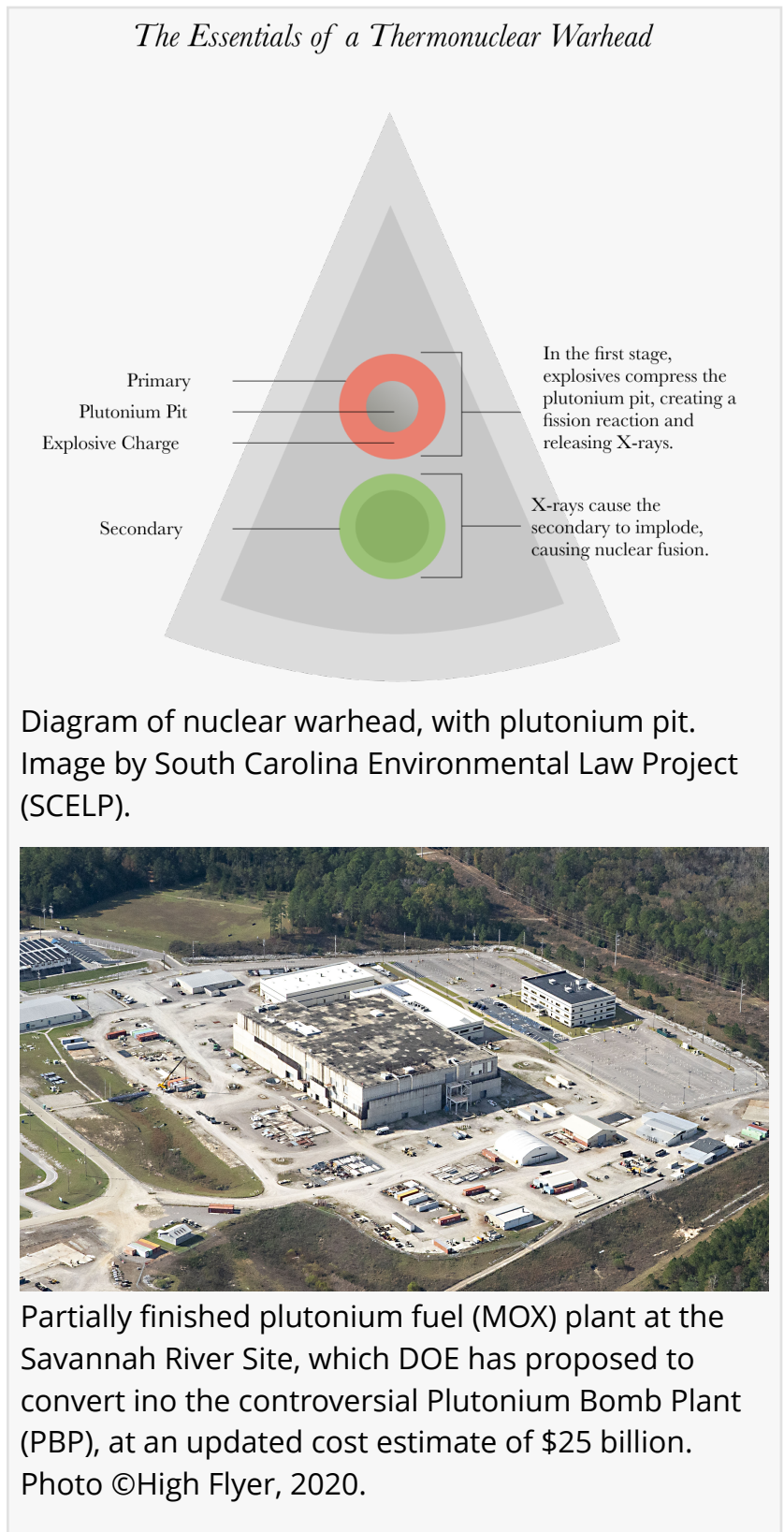
made in nuclear reactors that operated at SRS until the late 1980s). The first new pits would go into the W87-1 warhead planned for the new Sentinel ICBM, a project whose cost has also soared dramatically and whose need has faced growing questions.

“The pit facility is central to a brewing nuclear arms race and thus should be unwelcome in South Carolina but contractor profits are driving its location here,” said Tom Clements, director of the public interest group Savannah River Site Watch, based in Columbia, SC. “Given the massive cost overrun projected for the SRS pit plant and the growing threat of the unconstrained pursuit of new nuclear weapons, it’s time for cooler heads to prevail and for the government to hit the pause button on this misguided and unnecessary project,” added Clements.

The goal for the SRS pit plant is to produce 50 or more pits per year, with the Los Alamos National Lab making 30 or more pits per year, initially to be used in new warheads. Though it has not been clearly stated by NNSA, it appears, according to SRS Watch, that the long-term goal is to replace all pits in all 4400 active and reserve warheads, keeping the U.S. on a footing to fight a full-scale nuclear war.

Reflecting the dramatic increase in the cost of the facility from the 2021 estimate, NNSA has proposed to spend over \$9 billion on the controversial SRS facility over the next 5 years. The request for FY 25 is about \$1.3 billion. In the recently passed funding for DOE, the [SRS pit plant received \\$1.06 for FY 24](#).

The Essentials of a Thermonuclear Warhead



The diagram illustrates the internal structure of a thermonuclear warhead, which is shaped like a teardrop. It is divided into two main stages: the Primary and the Secondary. The Primary stage consists of a central Plutonium Pit surrounded by an Explosive Charge. The Secondary stage is a larger, spherical component. Text on the right explains the process: in the first stage, explosives compress the plutonium pit, creating a fission reaction and releasing X-rays. These X-rays then cause the secondary stage to implode, leading to nuclear fusion.


Primary
Plutonium Pit
Explosive Charge

Secondary

In the first stage, explosives compress the plutonium pit, creating a fission reaction and releasing X-rays.

X-rays cause the secondary to implode, causing nuclear fusion.

Diagram of nuclear warhead, with plutonium pit. Image by South Carolina Environmental Law Project (SCELP).



An aerial photograph showing a large industrial facility under construction. The site includes several large buildings, parking lots filled with vehicles, and various pieces of construction equipment. The facility is situated in a wooded area with some cleared land.

Partially finished plutonium fuel (MOX) plant at the Savannah River Site, which DOE has proposed to convert into the controversial Plutonium Bomb Plant (PBP), at an updated cost estimate of \$25 billion. Photo ©High Flyer, 2020.

In a February 23, 2024 response to a Freedom of Information Act request by the public interest groups Savannah River Site Watch, Nuclear Watch New Mexico (Santa Fe) and Tri-Valley CAREs (Livermore, CA), and later posted on line, DOE's National Nuclear Security Administration revealed in a review of contractor performance that the design of the SRS facility faced problems and delays. The [FY 23 Performance Evaluation Report \(PER\)](#) for contractor Savannah River Nuclear Solutions stated that project "design continued to slip in FY23" and "the design performance measurement baseline completion date continued to trend negative due to less than adequate design integration."

The original goal was to have the SRS pit plant operable by 2030 but that date has quickly slipped to 2036, according to a NNSA document obtained by SRS Watch via a FOIA request. (NNSA's "Critical Decision (CD)-1 Independent Project Review (IPR)," March 2021, obtained by SRS Watch via a FOIA request, see page 24 for 2036 operational date of SRS pit plant:

<https://srswatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Doc-1-SRPPF-CD-1-IPR-Final-Report-210505-2.pdf>)

Pit production would produce a large amount of radioactive plutonium waste, called transuranic waste (TRU), aimed to be disposed of in DOE's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in New Mexico. But is unclear if WIPP, whose volume is capped by federal law, could accommodate the amount of TRU projected to result from pit production. SRS Watch and allied non-profit groups (named above) have a lawsuit in federal court in Columbia, SC - Docket 1:21-cv-1942 - aimed at forcing NNSA to prepare a "Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement" (PEIS) analyzing all environmental impacts at all DOE sites involved in any aspect of pit production or disposal of waste from such production. The original case was filed in June 2021 and is proceeding on the schedule set by the court..

The FY 25 NNSA budget request indicates a "project schedule extension of approximately 1 to 3 years," which would add billions to the cost and further undermine the claimed necessity of the project.

"Based on past DOE performance with large projects, yet more cost overruns and schedule delays are all but guaranteed; the time to stop this controversial project is now," added Clements.

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