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With New START Ratified It's Time to Examine the National Security and Economic Costs of "Modernization"

Santa Fe, NM – Nuclear Watch New Mexico applauds Senate ratification of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). While this arms reduction treaty is modest in scope, we nevertheless believe its ratification is an absolutely essential step toward subsequent treaties that 1) progressively make deeper cuts to strategic weapons; 2) cut tactical (battlefield) weapons, which are particularly prone to theft and diversion; and 3) lead to multilateral negotiations involving all nuclear powers.

But with ratification now accomplished, the nation should seriously question the national security and economic costs of so-called "modernization" of the nuclear weapons stockpile and its supporting research and production complex. New START ratification has come with a heavy price, that being the massive rebuilding of the production side of U.S. nuclear weapons complex and the future makeover of an extensively tested nuclear stockpile that is known to be reliable.

Critics in the Senate, led primarily by Republican Whip Jon Kyl (R.-AZ), claimed that multiyear funding commitments to "modernization" had to be made as a *quid pro quo* for ratification. Given the necessity to "buy" at least 9 crucial Republican votes, in February President Obama raised the fiscal year 2011 budget for the nuclear weapons programs of the Department of Energy's semi-autonomous National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) by 14%. In April, the Administration announced long range plans to increase funding for NNSA nuclear weapons programs from \$6.4 billion in 2010 to just under \$10 billion by 2020, nearly double the historic Cold War average of \$5.1 billion. Still this did not satisfy Kyl et al, and in November the Obama Administration further pledged another \$4.5 billion dedicated to "modernizing" the nuclear weapons complex, for a total of \$85 billion over the next decade.

"Modernization" means expanded capabilities for more nuclear weapons production. In his now-famous April 2009 Prague speech President Obama declared a nuclear weapons-free world to be a critical long-term national security goal. We agree. At the same time, he also said that until then the safety and reliability of the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile must be rigorously maintained and guaranteed. We agree as well, but the best way to maintain nuclear weapons safety and reliability is "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

The existing nuclear weapons stockpile was physically tested, and has been certified to be safe and reliable every year since Bush Sr. signed the testing moratorium in 1992. A 1993 "Stockpile Life Study" by the Sandia National Laboratories stated, "It is clear that, although nuclear weapons age, they do not wear out; they last as long as the nuclear weapons community (DoD and DOE) desires. In fact, we can find no

example of a nuclear weapons retirement where age was ever a major factor in the retirement decision.” [Parentheses in the original.]

Since then, a November 2006 study initiated by NukeWatch NM though Senator Jeff Bingaman found that the performance lifetimes of the critical plutonium pit “triggers” last more than a century, contrary to previous NNSA claims of around 45 years. Further, in December 2009 the same independent nuclear weapons consultants to the federal government (known as the JASONS) found that “Lifetimes of today’s nuclear warheads could be extended for decades, with no anticipated loss in confidence, by using approaches similar to those employed in LEPs to date.” LEPs are Life Extension Programs that are already being implemented within existing programs and existing facilities. Thus there is no need for the hyperbolic “modernization” that is part of the bargain of ratifying New START.

But to the contrary NNSA and the nuclear weapons labs are planning to make extensive changes to the stockpile, even possibly as radical as heavily modifying the nuclear explosive packages. There is a danger through endless make-work and progressively deeper modifications that ultimately confidence in stockpile reliability is lost. This can become a real national security issue, demanding that so-called modernization of the stockpile be seriously questioned now.

Concerning the rebuilding of the production side of the U.S. nuclear weapons complex, NNSA’s FY 2011 *Stockpile Stewardship and Management Plan* calls for a “Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Project (CMRR) Nuclear Facility” to be built at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. It will provide analytical capabilities to support expanding plutonium pit production from the currently approved rate of 20 per year to up to 80 per year by 2022. When first proposed to Congress in 2004 NNSA claimed that the CMRR Project would cost \$660 million. Estimated costs are now \$5 billion and rising.

NNSA’s FY 2011 SSM Plan also calls for building a new Uranium Processing Facility (UPF) at the Y-12 production plant near Oak Ridge, TN, to “ramp up to a production capability of up to 80 canned subassemblies [the thermonuclear secondaries] per year by 2022.” The original estimate for the UPF was around \$1 billion, but is now as high as \$6.5 billion. And even these staggering costs are not final because the designs of the CMRR-Nuclear Facility and the UPF are still only ~ 40% complete. NNSA is notorious for cost overruns, and its parent Department of Energy has been on the Government Accountability Office’s high-risk list for project cost escalations for nearly twenty years.

NukeWatch Director Jay Coghlan commented, “Wasting money on vastly expensive new facilities and serious modifications to already safe and highly effective nuclear weapons will undermine our own national security. It also means diverting funding from other programs that could help rebuild America and keep its citizens healthy and prosperous. Reducing the federal debt is in the real interests the nation’s security, not shoveling more money into unneeded, badly managed, provocative nuclear weapons programs.”

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References:

1993 Sandia Stockpile Life Study at

http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/Sandia_93_StockpileLife.pdf

2006 JASON Pit Life Study at

http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/JASON_ReportPuAging.pdf

2009 JASON Life Extension Program Study at

http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/JASON_ReportLEP.pdf

A two-page fact sheet on three new nuclear weapons production facilities is available at

<http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/NewUS-productionfacilities4-29-10.pdf>.

A budget chart of historic and projected levels of funding for NNSA nuclear weapons research and production programs is available at

http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/Weapons_Chart_All_Nov_2010.pdf.

The NNSA's FY 2011 *Stockpile Stewardship and Management Plan* is available at

<http://www.nukewatch.org/importantdocs/index.html>