

Budget Deal Mixed Bag for Nuclear Weapons Programs

Planned Long-Term Trend Not Sustainable

Following December's budget deal Congressional appropriators have completed a one trillion dollar omnibus appropriations bill for this fiscal year, expected to pass given that neither political party wants another shutdown. The federal government has been running on a Continuing Resolution since October 1, and the omnibus bill now provides funding levels for the entire fiscal year 2014. Concerning the National Nuclear Security Administration's nuclear weapons programs, the appropriators made a slight cut to Obama's requested \$7.87 billion, funding "Total Weapons Activities" at \$7.78 billion.

All of this, of course, takes place within a larger context. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) recently released a study entitled Projected Costs of Nuclear Forces 2014 -2023. Its stunning conclusion is that maintenance and "modernization" of the nuclear weapons stockpile, delivery systems, and research and production complex will cost \$355 billion over the next decade. This is 70% higher than the figure the Obama Administration reported to Congress in May 2012.

As if this were not bad enough, the CBO also reports that costs after 2023 will increase yet more rapidly since "modernization" is only now beginning. The report does not attempt to project costs for maintenance and modernization of nuclear forces over the planned period of the next thirty years, but given current trends it will easily exceed one trillion dollars. This is simply not sustainable, given the nation's continuing budget constraints.

The new omnibus appropriations bill has fully funded the most controversial program, the B61 nuclear bomb Life Extension Program (LEP), at the president's request of \$537 million. This overrode a proposed cut by Senate Energy and Water Development Appropriations, a key subcommittee that Senator Tom Udall sits on. Udall vigorously opposed that cut, saying that he wanted to save a few hundred jobs in New Mexico.

The B61 LEP has exploded in costs from an original \$4 billion dollars to \$12 billion, including a program synchronized with the Pentagon to give the bomb a new tail fin guidance kit that would transform it into the world's first nuclear "smart" bomb. Its main mission is forward deployment in NATO countries, a relic of the Cold War, contradicting Obama's rhetoric of lowering the presence of battlefield nuclear weapons in Europe.

But this is not a clear-cut victory for NNSA and the nuclear weapons labs. The appropriators cut funding for the B83 nuclear bomb that NNSA claims the B61 LEP will enable it to retire (leaving aside the fact that it was already planned for retirement). The appropriators made clear that they wanted to hold NNSA to its word. Moreover, the appropriators demanded detailed reporting on major warhead refurbishments, which they applied retroactively to the B61 LEP, and cut the requested amount for the tail fin guidance kit in half. Finally, the fight over the B61 LEP will soon start all over again with the release of the proposed FY 2015 federal budget, expected in late February or early March.

So whereas the NNSA and the labs have won an ambiguous victory in the B61 LEP, the rest of the omnibus appropriations bill demonstrates how deeply troubled their nuclear weapons programs are. Foremost amongst these is a planned Life Extension Program for the W78 ICBM warhead, proposed to be "interoperable" with the W88 sub-launched warhead. This is the first of three proposed interoperable warheads, which the NNSA and labs want to use to transform both the nuclear weapons stockpile and the research and production complex that supports it, with requisite exorbitant appropriations to fund them. In a serious blow to this scheme, the appropriators funded only \$38 million out of \$72.69 million requested for paper studies. Although not yet officially reported, conventional wisdom in Washington, DC is that the Nuclear Weapons Council (composed of senior officials from both NNSA and the Pentagon) has already canceled the interoperable warhead.

The appropriators also require NNSA to submit a report by May 1 explaining the costs and benefits of stress testing plutonium pits at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California. These radioactive nuclear weapons cores would have to be transported back and forth from the Los Alamos Lab. This is significant because Livermore's continuing future in nuclear weapons programs is becoming increasingly questionable, given the failure of its flagship National Ignition Facility to initiate fusion, its loss of security status to handle large amounts of plutonium, and now the doubtful future of interoperable warheads, which it was banking on.

Concerning the proposed Uranium Processing Facility (UPF) near Oak Ridge, TN, the appropriators provided \$309 out of \$325.8 million requested, but noted that it is an adjustment caused by the necessity to consider additional alternatives. The UPF has been under increasing fire after a half-billion dollar design mistake and a recent Pentagon estimate that it would cost \$12 to \$19 billion, up from \$6 billion. Conspicuous in its absence is any mention of follow-on to the deferred plutonium facility at LANL (the "CMRR-Nuclear Facility") whose mission is to expand plutonium pit production, or NNSA's

“alternative plutonium strategy.”

The appropriators also provided \$343.5 million for the Mixed Oxide (MOX) Fuel Fabrication Facility, adding to the \$320 million requested. However, they directed NNSA to identify the root causes of cost increases and prioritize recommended solutions and corrective measures, showing that this program too is in serious jeopardy.

The appropriators funded \$224.79 million for “cleanup” at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, which primarily consists of removing radioactive transuranic wastes that were suppose to be shipped to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant a decade ago. In contrast, LANL is planning to “cap and cover” around one million cubic meters of radioactive and toxic wastes and backfill, creating a de facto permanent, unlined nuclear waste dump above groundwater and the Rio Grande.

Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch New Mexico Director, commented, “The nuclear weaponeers have won for now the battle over funding for the gold-plated B61 bomb Life Extension Program, but we look forward to the coming fight over next year’s budget. The rest of their plans are falling apart because they are so often their own worst enemy with constant cost overruns and lack of clear need. We are confident that given the trillion dollar cost for future nuclear weapons, subs, bombers, and missiles, the public will increasingly demand cleanup and related jobs, not more nuclear bombs.”

#

The omnibus appropriations bill can be viewed at <http://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20140113/113-HR3547-JSOM-D-F.pdf>

The NNSA section begins at p. 34 or PDF p. 70.