



Los Alamos Study Group

Nuclear disarmament • Environmental, economic, and social resilience • Peace, not war

July 24, 2026

Re: [House passes requirement to build more than 200 plutonium nuclear warhead cores \["pits"\] annually by 2050....](#), press release, Jul 23, 2026

Dear congressional colleagues --

I am writing to draw your attention to the above press release, which discusses and contextualizes the House's proposal to greatly increase the statutory requirement for plutonium pit production capacity by mid-century.

We have no clear idea what the rationale for this proposal might be, since on its face it makes little sense.

As you know, acquiring pit production capability at two sites is very costly ("[Plutonium "pit" production now a \\$60 billion program -- \\$20 billion down, \\$40 billion to go](#)," Jun 8, 2026). Takeaways from that analysis, under the assumptions we report, include these:

- Estimated total acquisition and startup costs at LANL through FY34 are about \$29.2 B, or \$32.2 B if \$3 B in pre-2019 program costs are included as the Government Accountability Office (GAO) [tallied](#) in 2023 (at p. 12, after subtracting the construction costs we counted separately).
- Estimated forward acquisition and startup costs at LANL are \$17.8 B.
- Estimated total acquisition and startup costs at SRS (through FY35, in our assumptions) are about \$29.4 B.
- Estimated forward costs at SRS are \$21.6 B.
- The estimated combined total cost of restoring pit production under the two-site plan is \$61.6 B (including \$3 B for LANL pit program costs from FY05-FY18, per GAO).
- The estimated combined forward cost of restoring pit production under the two-site plan is \$39.6 B.

For reference, total Manhattan Project costs through December 31, 1945 were \$46.5 billion, if updated to April 2026 dollars using the Bureau of Labor Statistics inflation [calculator](#) (see Schwartz et. al., [Atomic Audit](#), p. 60).

As you may know, the NNSA, in the only [analysis of alternatives](#) the agency did for its pit program, rejected two-site production in 2017 as needless and wasteful. The only [engineering analysis](#) of options (in 2018) did not even analyze the present option.

The [independent analysis](#) of NNSA's choice commissioned by Congress warned against pursuing the very path NNSA is taking now (two production shifts in LANL's PF-4, "surging" to produce more than 30 pits per year there). The same study concluded that achievement of 80 ppy by 2030 was impossible, and that attempting to do so would risk success of the 30 ppy program. Retaining that requirement is just bad law.

Both main sites have experienced tremendous cost increases and schedule delays, and there may be more coming. Seven years into the two main projects (the Los Alamos Plutonium Pit Production Project, LAP4, and the Savannah River Plutonium Processing Facility, SRPPF), neither one has an approved project baseline as of this date. (See the historical resources compiled in [Bulletin 366: Letter to Congress and the Administration re plutonium pit production in the pending defense authorization bill; pit reuse study; the scary journey to work at LANL](#), Sep 15, 2025).

LANL has the longer -- and more sordid -- history of low-balled costs and broken promises in this regard. Sean McDonald, senior advisor to NNSA Administrator Williams for plutonium programs, included his involvement in "three failed attempts to restart the pit production mission at LANL" in his humorous self-description in a speech this past January which I attended. (Our count, by the way, is four prior failed attempts, not three.) Cost estimates at LANL are now running a full order of magnitude higher than when the program began.

Regarding pit aging -- in case there is any confusion about this -- the present uncertainty about long-term aging effects does not really affect today's key decisions. We already know that:

- If the U.S. is to maintain a nuclear arsenal of whatever size and composition, there will need to be to be an enduring, adequate pit production facility. Such a facility has a long timeline to acquire, and there are considerable uncertainties involved. Construction on such a facility has begun; the design is more or less complete; and a lot if not all of the long-lead equipment has been ordered.
- The pit production portion of LANL's 50-year-old PF-4, however improved, cannot be that enduring, adequate facility. As [NNSA](#) and [GAO](#) have both discussed, adding additional "modules" to expand PF-4 is a fraught plan, far more expensive, complicated, time-consuming, and inadequate in reality than in theory. Prospects for another high-hazard plutonium facility on the LANL site are clouded.
- While pit performance in the long run remains partially or wholly unknown, we do know that all presently deployed pits face no critical aging issues in the near term. Apart from the perceived need to add new warheads, there is no actual stockpile need to produce pits for at least the coming decade.
- LANL pit production is fragile. Some of the fragility is inherent in the elderly facilities involved. Yet much of the fragility is beyond NNSA's ability to address no matter how much money is spent, because it is rooted "outside the fence." That fragility traces back to LANL's location, its geography and topography, both of which affect access and the available labor pool. Los Alamos -- the town -- "needs another 10,000 housing units," i.e. is roughly half the size it needs to be to support LANL at its present size, as NNSA's Ted Wyka said on more than one occasion. Almost every day I get a call that touches on the difficulty of building housing in Los Alamos -- there are simply no sufficiently-skilled workers available -- even if there were land. LANL has hired those workers. These are just the beginning of the site's problems. (See [Prepared remarks for a panel discussion at the National Press Club by Greg Mello, Los Alamos Study Group, 11/13/24](#).)
- SRPPF is horribly expensive, but any greenfield alternative will cost more and take longer -- as NNSA said in 2017, on a smaller fiscal scale. Everything costs more.
- As noted in yesterday's press release, NNSA now says production at LANL of 10 ppy is sufficient to demonstrate capability to produce 30 ppy.

Given all this, it is hard to understand the logic of building up LANL's pit production capacity rather than conserving LANL's facilities and using them for technology demonstration and training.

In particular, the requirement to produce 80 pits in 2030 appears poorly justified -- and perhaps impossible. The quest to achieve this threatens workers -- and the facilities involved. We think it should be revisited.

In other words, we think the HASC has the situation exactly backwards. Pit production requirements should be decreased, not increased. And if that can't be done, we urge our Senate colleagues to reject the House proposal.

Best wishes and thank you for your attention,

Greg Mello, for the Study Group