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U.S. Rolls Out Nuclear Plan

The administration's proposal would modernize the nation's complex of laboratories and factories as well as produce new bombs.

By Ralph Vartabedian, Times Staff Writer  
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The Bush administration Wednesday unveiled a blueprint for rebuilding the nation's decrepit nuclear weapons complex, including restoration of a large-scale bomb manufacturing capacity.

The plan calls for the most sweeping realignment and modernization of the nation's massive system of laboratories and factories for nuclear bombs since the end of the Cold War.

Until now, the nation has depended on carefully maintaining aging bombs produced during the Cold War arms race, some several decades old. The administration, however, wants the capability to turn out 125 new nuclear bombs per year by 2022, as the Pentagon retires older bombs that it says will no longer be reliable or safe.

Under the plan, all of the nation's plutonium would be consolidated into a single facility that could be more effectively and cheaply defended against possible terrorist attacks. The plan would remove the plutonium kept at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory by 2014, though transfers of the material could start sooner. In recent years, concern has grown that Livermore, surrounded by residential neighborhoods in the Bay Area, could not repel a terrorist attack.

But the administration blueprint is facing sharp criticism, both from those who say it does not move fast enough to consolidate plutonium stores and from those who say restarting bomb production would encourage aspiring nuclear powers across the globe to develop weapons.

The plan was outlined to Congress on Wednesday by Thomas D'Agostino, head of nuclear weapons programs at the National Nuclear Security Administration, a part of the Energy Department. Though the weapons proposal would restore the capacity to make new bombs, D'Agostino said it was part of a larger effort to accelerate the dismantling of aging bombs left from the Cold War.

D'Agostino acknowledged in an interview that the administration was walking a fine line by modernizing the U.S. nuclear weapons program while assuring other nations that it was not seeking a new arms race. The credibility of the contention rests on the U.S. intent to sharply reduce its inventory of weapons.



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The administration is also quickly moving ahead with a new nuclear bomb program known as the "reliable replacement warhead," which began last year. Originally described as an effort to update existing weapons and make them more reliable, it has been broadened and now includes the potential for new bomb designs. Weapons labs currently are engaged in a design competition.

The U.S. built its last nuclear weapon in 1989 and last tested a weapon underground in 1992. Since the Cold War, the nation has had massive stockpiles of nuclear weapons to deter potential attacks. By contrast, it would increasingly rely on the capability to build future bombs for deterrence, D'Agostino said.

The blueprint calls for a modern complex to design a new nuclear bomb and have it ready in less than four years, allowing the nation to respond to changing military requirements. Similar proposals in the past, such as for a nuclear bomb to attack underground bunkers, provoked concern that they undermined U.S. policy to stop nuclear proliferation.

The impetus for the plan is a growing belief that efforts to maintain older nuclear bombs and keep up a large nuclear weapons industrial complex are technically and financially unsustainable. Last year, a task force led by San Diego physicist David Overskei recommended that the Energy Department consolidate the system of eight existing weapons complexes into one site.

Overskei said Wednesday that the cost of security alone for the current infrastructure of plants over the next two decades was roughly \$25 billion. Security costs have grown, because the Sept. 11 attacks have led the Energy Department to believe terrorists could mount a larger and better armed strike force.

Peter Stockton, a former Energy Department security consultant who is now an investigator for the Project on Government Oversight, criticized the plutonium consolidation plan in House testimony, saying it would delay the difficult work too far into the future. Stockton added in an interview that the plutonium transfer at Livermore could be accomplished in a few months.

Until now, Livermore lab officials have sharply disagreed with the idea of removing plutonium from their site, saying it was essential to their work. On Wednesday, a lab spokesman said the issue was "far less controversial" and the "decision rests in Washington."

The Bush plan, described at a hearing of the strategic subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, would consolidate much of the weapons capacity, but not as completely or quickly as outside critics would like.

The overall plan would not be fully implemented until 2030.

A crucial part of restarting U.S. nuclear bomb production involves so-called plutonium pits, hollow spheres surrounded by high explosives. The pits start nuclear fission and trigger the nuclear fusion in a bomb.

The plutonium pits were built at the Energy Department's former Rocky Flats site near Denver until the weapons plant was shut down in 1989 after it was found to have violated environmental regulations.

In recent years, Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico has tried to start limited



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production of plutonium pits and hopes to build a certified pit that will enter the so-called war reserve next year. Los Alamos would be producing about 30 to 50 pits per year by 2012, but the Energy Department said that was not enough to sustain the U.S. nuclear deterrent.

In his testimony, D'Agostino estimated plutonium pits would last 45 to 60 years, after which they would be unreliable and might result in an explosion smaller than intended. Critics outside the government sharply dispute that conclusion, saying there is no evidence that pits degrade over time and that the nation can keep an adequate nuclear deterrent by maintaining its existing weapons.

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