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U.S. Plan for New Nuclear Weapons Advances

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The United States took another step yesterday toward building a new stockpile of up to 2,200 deployed nuclear weapons that would last well into the 21st century, announcing the start of a multiyear process to repair and replace facilities where they would be developed and assembled and where older warheads could be more rapidly dismantled.

Thomas P. D'Agostino, head of defense programs for the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), told reporters that the "Complex 2030" program would repair or replace "inefficient, old and expensive [to maintain]" facilities at eight sites, including some buildings going back to the 1940s Manhattan Project that built the first atomic bombs. He said the sites -- primarily in California, New Mexico, Texas and Tennessee -- "are not sustainable for the long term."

Yesterday's announcement comes as the Bush administration is pressing its allies to take harsh steps to halt nuclear weapons programs in both North Korea and Iran that it says are violations of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. That same treaty calls for the United States and other members of the nuclear club to

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eliminate their own stockpiles, but it gives no deadline by which that should take place.

The Bush administration plan would replace the aging Cold War stockpile of about 6,000 warheads with a smaller, more reliable arsenal that would last for decades. It would also consolidate the handling of plutonium, the most dangerous of the nuclear materials, in one center that would be built at a site that already houses similar special materials. Another part of the plan would be to remove all highly enriched uranium from the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California, D'Agostino said.

Key to the Bush plan is an expected decision in December by the NNSA on a design for the new "Reliable Replacement Warhead" (RRW). The nation's two nuclear weapons laboratories, Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore, are competing for the new warhead design. Before going ahead with any new warhead, however, the NNSA would have to get Congress's approval to move into actual engineering development.

A requirement of the new design is that it must be based on nuclear packages tested in the past so that it will not require the United States to break the moratorium on underground tests to make certain the RRW will work.

The process initiated yesterday will provide the public the first chance to give

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its views on the Bush nuclear program. To carry out the rebuilding of the complex, the agency must prepare updated environmental-impact statements for the eight sites, including public comments, and hold hearings at each location.

Although the administration has decided to go ahead with the Complex 2030 plan and sees the RRW as a way to have a more reliable weapon, the public will also get a chance to comment on two alternative plans for handling the nuclear stockpile -- plans that the administration has rejected.

The Bush option, titled "Transform to a More Modern, Cost-Effective Nuclear Weapons Complex (Complex 2030)," would call for stepped-up dismantling of older warheads, a process that has been slowed by the aging of some facilities and by efforts to refurbish other deployed warheads.

The second option to be placed before the public is called the "No Action Alternative," which is described as "the status quo as it exists today and is presently planned," according to yesterday's notice in the Federal Register about the upcoming environmental-impact hearings. That approach would keep the current programs going and defer decisions on the future of the nuclear stockpile.

The third option, titled "Reduced Operations and Capability-Based Complex Alternative," could draw support from arms control and anti-nuclear activists.

Under this approach, the NNSA would keep its current technologies for manufacturing weapons and its production facilities would not be upgraded. The production of plutonium triggers for current weapons, called pits, would remain limited at about 50 per year. Under the Bush plan, the new plutonium center could produce 125 pits a year, a number D'Agostino said would satisfy current planning for the 2,200 RRW stockpile of the future.

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