

The Uranium Processing Facility bomb plant appears to be headed—once again—for a budget train wreck in the near future. The biggest question left on the table is whether Congress will keep shoveling cash into the engine until the collision or adopt a conservative approach—draw back on funding now and sort out the future before plunging ahead.

While no analogy is perfect, the often used train wreck analogy seems fitting. Plans for the UPF bomb plant have been sidetracked twice in the last three years. With NNSA refusing to provide much solid information about the current plant, the UPF train has entered a long dark tunnel, riding on rails of taxpayer dollars. Hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars.

Ultimately, the UPF's two core problems may prove its undoing.

One problem is it just costs too darn much to build a new nuclear bomb plant. At this point, it appears the cost estimates go higher than NNSA can count. Language in a past spending bill capped the cost of the UPF at \$6.5 billion; now a new \$4.2 billion “cap” applies only to the first phase (the UPF), doesn't count money already spent, and only projects ten years into the future—and just like that, fiscal responsibility slides on down the track.

Nobody knows (or will tell) how much it will really cost to modernize weapons production infrastructure at Y12 so the NNSA can keep building bombs indefinitely.

The second problem is bigger, and related to the first: Is the UPF necessary at all? This question has been posed by OREPA, the Project on Government Oversight, the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability and others. Now it's being asked by Congress.



NNSA says they need to maintain the industrial capacity to produce 80 thermonuclear bomb cores (secondaries) per year and to do it with new, expensive, yet-to-be-proven technologies.

Unfortunately, unanswered questions have not slowed the NNSA's runaway spending locomotive. With no valid UPF plan approved, NNSA just keeps spending—hundreds of millions of dollars in 2013 and again in 2014.

NNSA TRIES SWITCHEROO

This fall, NNSA approached Congressional staffers with a proposal to decouple the UPF (Phase I) from the rest of the Y12 modernization train with the \$6.5 billion “budget cap” dedicated to Phase I only; the rest of the train would await a new schedule (and taxpayers would have to buy a new ticket)—cost unknown—at a later date.

Language in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), approved by the House, expected to pass in the Senate in early December, appears to give them most of what they asked for.

CONGRESS ACTS

The NDAA establishes a ten-year ceiling of \$4.2 billion on Phase I of the UPF—if NNSA thinks it will need more, it has to tell Congress by March 1, 2015. The \$4.2B cap *does not* include the roughly \$1.5 billion already spent.

The NDAA also requires the Secretary of Defense, after consulting with the Secretary of Energy and the head of the US nuclear forces, to document the need for a production capacity of 50-80 secondaries/year—the report is to be detailed, unclassified, and presented to Congress “not later than 120 days after the enactment of this Act.” That makes the due date early March.

Congress is also requiring NNSA to establish a modicum of accountability, with provisions requiring:

- a description of actions taken to hold contractors, employees of con-

tractors, and employees of the federal government accountable for the repeated failures within the project;

- a description of lines of responsibility, authority, and accountability for the project, including the roles and responsibilities for each key federal and contractor position; and

- a description of the structural reforms planned or implemented by the Secretary to ensure Phase I is executed on time and on schedule.

Congress also set a date for abandoning Building 9212 by 2025, though there is no indication this date is justified by any technical or safety assessment. Currently, building 9212 conducts dangerous operations despite its dramatic failure to meet current seismic standards—it is, literally, a ticking time bomb. Absent a commitment to shut down the unsafe facility, the only defense available to the workforce and community is prayer that an earthquake will not happen.

CORE QUESTION DESERVES ANSWER

Until now, failure to comply with the law that requires an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for major federal projects was one of NNSA's biggest problems with the third-generation UPF.

Now Congress is raising a prior question: Why do we need this facility in the first place?

Congress is not the first to ask this question, but they are the first who can command an answer.

For obvious reasons, this is the question that must always be answered first before taxpayer dollars are spent—in planning for major projects, the DOE calls this Critical Decision 0 (CD-0). When the second-generation UPF plan was scrapped, NNSA said they did not plan to revisit CD-0. Now it appears Congress is on the verge of requiring it.

It is not possible to know what the

Secretary of Defense will put in the report; some past claims used to justify the UPF have been met with skepticism by NNSA insiders. One clue to the “need” question is simply the difficulty with getting the UPF funded and built. If it were truly essential, if our nuclear stockpile could not be maintained without it, Congress would fund it straightaway.

The very fact that the question is on the table exposes the UPF for what it is—a very costly and inefficient jobs program, more pork for a community that has, over the last seventy years, ranked among the top five Congressional districts in the country in tax dollars eaten.

THE SPENDING GOES ON!

The exclamation point in that heading is astonishment mixed with outrage. With no authorized plan, no valid cost estimate, no confirmed need for the UPF, Congress is still approving a \$6+ billion bomb plant, including hundreds of millions of dollars in the current spending bill, and they are giving more than \$300 million this year to the management team that has already spent well over a billion dollars with nothing to show for it—or nothing they are willing to show.

This kind of project planning defies any definition of fiscal responsibility and is as far as one can get from the label “conservative.”

The spending “cap” is not a real cap. With Congress agreeing to apply the “cap” to Phase I of the UPF bomb plant only, and writing off past costs,

and requiring only a ten-year projection for a job that will take more than ten years, we have no credible estimate at all for the total cost of modernizing uranium operations at Y12—upgrading existing facilities and eventually replacing them, maintaining high security over a large footprint until consolidation happens decades from now, and whatever else is required to keep Y12 operating.

Even this loose accounting doesn't cover the total cost of the UPF. The guts of the bomb plant is the technology that will be installed in it. That technology, in development now, is funded separately from the UPF construction budget. The “cap” is for Phase I construction.

In January, a new Congress takes the throttle. It remains to be seen if the new Congress will continue to throw money at an ill-defined, unjustified, money-devouring project.

Responsible conservative leadership will require not only answers, but a legitimate independent cost estimate. Responsible conservative leadership will require NNSA to follow the law and begin preparation of the required EIS. Responsible conservative leadership will base the funding cap for the UPF on actual cost projections rather than a moving-target number pulled out of thin air—\$4.2 billion? \$6.5 billion? Responsible conservative leadership will refuse to fund any bomb plant at all unless a legitimate need exists—and pie-in-the-sky weapon-designer dreams of new nuclear bombs does not meet that description.

The UPF Accountability Project is a project of the Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance to collect, develop and provide information to the public about the multi-billion dollar Uranium Processing Facility planned for the Y12 Nuclear Weapons Complex in Oak Ridge, TN in the spirit of Thomas Jefferson who admonished that an informed public is the only safe repository of government.

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