

The Nuclear Stockpile's Steward: Arms Control Today Interviews NNSA Administrator Thomas D'Agostino

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(Washington, D.C.) As the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) seeks to support President Barack Obama's goals of ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and preventing nuclear terrorism, Arms Control Today, the journal of the Arms Control Association, has conducted an exclusive interview with NNSA Administrator Thomas D'Agostino. The interview, which will appear in the April issue of the magazine, is now available to journalists and ACT subscribers.

In the interview, D'Agostino highlighted his agency's plans for maintaining the U.S. nuclear stockpile and controlling nuclear materials worldwide. Asked whether there is any technical reason for the United States to resume nuclear explosive testing in the foreseeable future, D'Agostino said: "No. In my opinion, we have a safe and secure and reliable stockpile.... There's no need to conduct underground [nuclear] testing." He noted that the U.S. government conducts an annual review that includes input from multiple sources, including nuclear weapons laboratory directors.

"The United States has a plan to extend the life of the existing stockpile" without testing, D'Agostino said. "[T]he Nuclear Posture Review very clearly directs our laboratory directors to study the full range of options to make sure that we get the benefit of their technical knowledge and capability.... [T]he laboratory directors have endorsed this as an acceptable approach to move forward with taking care of the stockpile out into the future," he said.

As part of its life-extension efforts, the NNSA is considering a currently unused diagnostic tool, called "scaled experiments," which would explosively test a scaled-down hollow sphere or shell of plutonium. Because the material would not reach criticality, the experiments would not violate the CTBT. The United States has not conducted scaled experiments "in a long time," D'Agostino said. He said, "Before we decide to pursue a path of additional scaled experiments, we want to make sure we understand the benefit that it provides versus the costs, the financial costs, associated with doing that. It's going to take us a few years to get to that point because this is the heart of the matter, frankly."

D'Agostino said his agency is on track to fulfill Obama's 2009 commitment to secure the world's vulnerable nuclear material within four years. "[T]he plan that we have right now completes this effort in December of 2013.... We've identified a scope of work to get this four-year material secured," he said.

On the issue of operating with fiscal year 2011 funding that is below the president's request for nonproliferation work, he said: "There likely will be some minor impacts associated with, 'Well, we'll have to move this shipment back a few months.' Our plan was to front load that Global Threat Reduction Initiative work to get it under way robustly in 2011 so that as schedules change, we don't lose track and we can still hit our December 2013 target. Our plan is still to do that. We're down at the FY10 levels, but we can reallocate resources.... [W]e're managing just fine, but things get harder as the year goes on."

D'Agostino also talked about the NNSA's work on disposition of surplus plutonium from the U.S.

nuclear weapons program. The effort centers on building a plant at the Savannah River Site in South Carolina to turn the plutonium into mixed-oxide (a mixture of uranium oxide and plutonium oxide) fuel for commercial reactors. D'Agostino said the NNSA is in discussions with two utilities, Energy Northwest and the Tennessee Valley Authority, about supplying them with the fuel for use in their reactors.

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Journalists who are not ACT subscribers and would like the text of the full interview may contact Tom Z. Collina.

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