

NNSA Budget Cuts Los Alamos Facility

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The Obama administration zeroed out funding for construction of the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Facility Replacement (CMRR) at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico in its fiscal year 2013 budget request and announced it would delay work on the facility for at least five years.

According to the budget request, the delay will save \$1.8 billion from fiscal year 2013 to fiscal year 2017.

The purpose of the CMRR is to support increased production capability of plutonium cores for nuclear weapons and perform technical analysis on nuclear materials. Funding for the new Los Alamos facility falls into the section of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) budget dealing with weapons activities, which include operating and maintaining the infrastructure and facilities necessary to ensure the safety, security, and reliability of the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile.

Despite the cut in CMRR funding, the weapons activities request of nearly \$7.6 billion is five percent above the amount that Congress appropriated for fiscal year 2012. The \$7.6 billion budget is, however, \$53 million less than the fiscal year 2012 request for NNSA weapons activities.

Sequencing CMRR and UPF

The CMRR cut is a result of the NNSA's decision to sequence construction of two new facilities at its national laboratories. Because of fiscal constraints, the NNSA said in the budget request, it will prioritize completion of the Uranium Processing Facility (UPF) at the Y-12 National Security Complex in Tennessee and delay the CMRR. According to the NNSA's budget justification document, the UPF will "provide new facilities and equipment to consolidate all [enriched uranium] operations at Y-12."

The CMRR construction can be deferred because existing facilities at the national laboratories have the "inherent capacity to provide adequate support" for plutonium activities, the document said. In a Feb. 13 video, NNSA Administrator Thomas D'Agostino said that the NNSA had adjusted its plutonium strategy and would utilize existing facilities to "ensure uninterrupted plutonium operations" while focusing funding on other key modernization projects. During a conference call with reporters that day, D'Agostino emphasized that the decision was a deferral rather than a cancellation.

For fiscal year 2012, Congress appropriated \$200 million for the CMRR, \$100 million less than the administration's budget request. The 2012 budget request's future-year projections estimated a \$300 million request for the CMRR in fiscal year 2013 and \$350 million per year in fiscal years 2014, 2015, and 2016. Total project costs for the CMRR already have increased markedly since 2004. At that time, the NNSA estimated that the CMRR would cost \$660 million; current estimates place the cost closer to \$6 billion.

As a result of the decision to sequence construction of the CMRR and UPF, the NNSA budget request reflects an accelerated building schedule for the Tennessee facility. For fiscal year 2013, the administration requests \$340 million for UPF construction and project engineering and design, a \$180 million increase over the enacted funding for 2012. The request is also a \$150 million increase over what the 2012 budget request estimated for UPF funding for 2013.

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Future-year projections for UPF construction based on programmatic requirements were not included in the fiscal year 2013 budget request, which stated that the “funding profile” for the UPF would be “updated and communicated at a later date.” The budget request did provide an estimate of \$6.5 billion for the total project cost of the UPF between fiscal years 2005 and 2017. The estimate was based on fiscal year 2012 budget projections.

Some policymakers are questioning the decision to sequence the UPF and CMRR. In a Feb. 17 speech at a nuclear policy conference in Arlington, Va., Rep. Michael Turner (R-Ohio), chairman of the House Armed Services strategic forces subcommittee, criticized President Barack Obama for “abandon[ing] key commitments” to modernize the nuclear arsenal and weapons complex, including the CMRR, that the administration made in negotiations with Senate Republicans to help secure Senate approval of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in December 2010.

In a February 2011 message sent to the Senate, Obama said he intended to “accelerate, to the extent possible” the design and engineering phases of the CMRR and UPF and “request full funding” for the facilities when the phases were completed.

However, in August 2011, Congress passed and Obama signed the Budget Control Act, which sets spending caps for fiscal year 2013. During the Feb. 13 conference call, D’Agostino said the legislation led to a “very different” fiscal environment and forced the NNSA to revise its plans.

Life Extension Programs

Elsewhere in the request for weapons activities, the administration asked for nearly \$2.1 billion for “directed stockpile work,” an 11.5 percent increase over the \$1.9 billion that Congress appropriated for fiscal year 2012. That program is responsible for ensuring the safety and security of the nuclear weapons stockpile.

The rise in the request for directed stockpile work is partly the result of an increase for the B61 life extension program (LEP), which is designed to extend the lifespan of the bomb for an additional 20 years. The B61 is a gravity bomb carried by the U.S. bomber fleet and certified NATO aircraft. Funding for the B61 LEP was increased by \$146 million from the fiscal year 2012 appropriation, bringing the fiscal year 2013 request to \$369 million. According to budget documents, fiscal year 2013 funding on the B61 LEP will go toward systems engineering and development of components. Production of the refurbished B61 is scheduled to begin in fiscal year 2019.

The increase is partially offset by a cut to the LEP for the W76, one of the two warheads deployed on submarine-launched ballistic missiles. The \$175 million request for the W76 LEP represents an \$81 million cut from the fiscal year 2012 enacted funding. The NNSA stated in its budget documents that it would reduce the current production rate of the refurbished W76 warheads in order to increase funding for the B61.

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