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13 mai 2018

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The Energy Department's Savannah River site, which the Trump administration has decided not to complete, shown in January. (Reuters)

by [Paul Sonne](#) and [Steven Mufson](#)

The Trump administration is pulling the plug on a South Carolina facility designed to convert weapons-grade plutonium into nuclear reactor fuel that the U.S. government has already spent billions to partially build.

Even though construction will end, the Trump administration wants to spend billions more to wind down the project and retrofit the plant for a new mission, namely, the production of triggers for nuclear weapons.

The decision marks the culmination of a years-long effort by both the Trump and Obama administrations to end construction of the plant, actions that the South Carolina delegation in Congress blocked, preserving a source of jobs and federal funding in their districts.

The original idea behind the facility near the Savannah River in Aiken, S.C., was to take tons of excess plutonium that the United States produced during the Cold War for nuclear weapons and convert the dangerous material into mixed-oxide, or MOX, fuel for commercial reactors. The United States signed a pact with Russia in 2000 agreeing to dispose of a certain amount of the Cold War-era fissile material from both countries, a deal that was seen as an arms-control milestone.

But since construction of the South Carolina facility began, the project has become mired in lawsuits, delays and budget overruns, emerging as a prime example of waste and mismanagement by the Energy Department's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA). Meanwhile, relations between the United States and Russia soured, and Moscow pulled out of the pact in 2016, citing Washington's noncompliance.

As the woes and costs mounted, U.S. officials in Washington began to see the wisdom of killing the South Carolina project altogether. The contractor — a joint venture of Chicago Iron & Steel and the French nuclear giant Areva — repeatedly fell short of goals. Estimates for finishing the plant's construction alone ballooned to \$17 billion last year.

Estimates submitted to Congress by the NNSA said the government will have sunk an estimated \$7.6 billion into the MOX facility by its closure and would need to spend nearly \$50 billion more to finish construction and convert the plutonium over the coming decades, according to people familiar with the estimate. The government believes that diluting and disposing of the plutonium will instead cost about \$18.2 billion over about 30 years, they said.

"The decision to abandon the MOX project is the only reasonable decision as the MOX project isn't viable technically or financially," said Tom Clements, director of the public interest group Savannah River Site Watch and one of the project's sharpest critics. "What a monumental waste this has been."

Energy Secretary Rick Perry authorized the termination of construction in a document this week and promised to remove the 34 metric tons of plutonium the federal government had intended to convert at the facility from the state of South Carolina. The department now intends to dilute the plutonium with nonradioactive materials and dispose of it in a repository for defense waste in New Mexico.

"Several independent assessments have found the alternative dilute and dispose method to be a faster, less expensive, and less risky alternative to MOX," the NNSA said in a statement. "The Department of Energy is committed to meeting its obligation to the state of South Carolina to securely process and remove plutonium from the state."

In 2015, a group of more than a dozen prominent former arms negotiators and senior diplomats [sent a letter](#) to then-Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz saying the project was a threat to nonproliferation efforts. Many arms control advocates say that using plutonium for civilian purposes is unnecessary and uneconomical.

Lawmakers from South Carolina lashed out at Perry's decision to terminate construction of the plant. In a joint statement, the state's two senators, Republicans Lindsey O. Graham and Tim Scott, joined five of its congressmen, Republicans Joe Wilson, Jeff Duncan, Tom Rice, Trey Gowdy and Ralph Norman, in accusing the Energy Department of abandoning "one of the most important nonproliferation programs in the history of the world."

The South Carolina lawmakers say the Energy Department's new plan to dilute and dispose of the plutonium in New Mexico not only lacks approval from the state but also goes against what the United States and Russia agreed to in the 2000 pact. They say the plan has a questionable chance of success.

The NNSA is proposing that the South Carolina site instead begin producing plutonium cores that trigger nuclear weapons, better known as plutonium pits. The Pentagon wants the U.S. government to be able [to produce 30 plutonium pits a year by 2026 and 80 a year by 2030](#) to sustain the military's plans for its nuclear weapons. The only facility currently capable of producing them, Los Alamos National Laboratory, has yet to make one suitable for a nuclear weapon.

The Pentagon and the NNSA are now proposing that both Los Alamos in New Mexico and Savannah

River in South Carolina produce plutonium pits, arguing that the military should not rely on a single facility for production.

“This two-prong approach — with at least 50 pits per year produced at Savannah River and at least 30 pits per year at Los Alamos — is the best way to manage the cost, schedule, and risk of such a vital undertaking,” the NNSA’s administrator, Lisa E. Gordon-Hagerty, said in a joint statement Thursday with Ellen M. Lord, the undersecretary of defense for acquisition and sustainment.

The South Carolina lawmakers expressed support for production of plutonium pits at the Savannah River site but said they were concerned that Congress would be skeptical of the move. The New Mexico delegation wants Los Alamos to produce all of the pits. Some officials familiar with the plans are worried that the conversion of the South Carolina site to a new mission could cause more cost overruns.

Whether the military needs so many plutonium pits is a point of dispute. Some disarmament advocates say the military has enough old pits from dismantled weapons that will last for years and shouldn’t spend millions of dollars to produce new ones. But U.S. generals say the military shouldn’t count on old triggers and must replace the pits over time.