

## Senators critical of Energy Department's nuclear weapons spending

By David Ruppe, [Global Security Newswire](#)

The Energy Department's \$6.4 billion nuclear weapons maintenance and research programs may be wasteful, a congressional committee chairman said at a hearing Tuesday, indicating he might be considering a funding cut.

Senate Armed Services Strategic Forces Subcommittee Chairman Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., told National Nuclear Security Administration chief Linton Brooks he has "concerns about the efficiency" of Energy Department activities.

"I am unconvinced that we are getting all we can for every dollar," Sessions said, echoing comments he made last month to Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman that suggested \$1 billion in savings could be made.

Along similar lines, ranking committee Democrat Bill Nelson of Florida questioned whether the agency might at the Defense Department's request have taken on too many programs, citing early research for the administration's Reliable Replacement Warhead program.

"Perhaps [the Defense Department] is asking too much and money is being spent on projects that we will eventually not need," he said.

Brooks told the committee that the Energy Department's nuclear programs, which also include nuclear nonproliferation and Navy propulsion system work, took "dramatic reductions" in size and spending following the Cold War.

He said further that efforts were under way to shrink the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal by nearly half by 2012. Stockpile maintenance absorbs a majority of the program's budget. The administration has requested \$6.4 billion for the stockpile work in fiscal 2007 - the amount it received for this fiscal year - and \$9.3 billion for all its nuclear activities.

"We are transforming into a more efficient, more secure complex, but more work needs to be done. NNSA's 2007 budget request will allow us to continue our efforts," he said.

Brooks and other officials have described the Reliable Replacement Warhead program as just such a way of reducing the stockpile, making it more easily maintained, and thereby reducing stockpile maintenance costs.

The idea behind the program, Brooks said, is to "design replacement components that are easier to manufacture, safer and more secure, [and] eliminate environmentally dangerous materials, which also saves money."

The Reliable Replacement Warhead program appears intended to design new nuclear weapons and components to replace or swap out components of the U.S. arsenal as it ages. He said the program was undergoing a concept design competition, from which one will be selected in the fall for use by the department.

Brooks said the department's fiscal 2007 request for the nuclear weapons programs is \$860 million less than was forecasted two years ago, with "about half of that for deficit reduction, the other half redirected primarily to nonproliferation."

He said a congressional cut to fiscal 2006 funding for a Facilities and Infrastructure Recapitalization Program, intended to address a backlog of weapons complex physical infrastructure maintenance, should delay that program's scheduled completion in 2011 by two years.

In apparent agreement with Sessions and Nelson, though, Brooks said the nuclear weapons complex "still isn't right" in its current configuration because it cannot develop and build new nuclear weapons quickly.

He said administration plans to develop "a modern responsive infrastructure" were intended to address that and that efforts were under way to determine what the infrastructure should look like.

Brooks said there is reason to worry his agency would not be able to afford the Reliable Replacement Warhead program and pay for its other work.

"Right now the Reliable Replacement Warhead is a relatively - it's frightening to use \$27 million as a small number - but it is a relatively small fraction of our budget. But if it has the promise it's going to have, the resources for it will grow," he said.

If the warhead program is fully pursued, however, he said the agency could try to fund it by scaling back on life-extension programs for aging weapons.

"The question that we and the Department of Defense are wrestling with is how certain do we have to be that the RRW concept is really going to (a) work and (b) fit in with the country's priorities before we can start shifting resources away," he said.

"My guess is that in the next year or two you will see us walk away from some of the life extension, but that's assuming decisions that haven't been made yet," he said.

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