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IG questions warhead schedule

ROGER SNODGRASS, roger@lamonitor.com, Monitor Assistant Editor

A new report from the Energy Department's Inspector General has found delays, cost increases and management shortcomings related to extending the life of the W76 nuclear warhead.
Seven nuclear weapons facilities, including Los Alamos and Sandia national laboratories in New Mexico, are engaged in the project to refurbish the warhead under a stockpile stewardship activity known as life extension.

LANL and Y-12 National Security Complex both encountered delays in testing activities, the report said, that had reduced the scope of the current project for revitalizing the W76, used with submarine-launched Trident missiles.

At LANL, the IG reported from two years ago, a number of component tests, including six hydrotests and nine intermediate-scale tests were scheduled for completion in advance of a Final Design Review. Two of these hydrotests were not completed; one was cancelled and the other was conducted in June 2005, but a month after the Final Design Review in May 2005.

The hydrotest was conducted at LANL's Dual Axis Radiographic Hydrodynamic Test Facility (DARHT), a flash X-ray device that provides high-resolution X-ray images of imploding mock-ups of weapons components.

A spokesman for LANL said this morning the lab is confident the deadline for delivering the first W76 production unit will be met by the deadline of Sept. 30, 2007.

"We believe that the necessary project controls for the W76 program are in place and that the program is healthy," said Kevin Roark in the LANL communications office this morning.

In reply to the Inspector General's audit, the National Nuclear Security Administration wrote that the nuclear weapons management agency "believes that the appropriate management tools and management focus are in place to ensure successful execution of the W76 refurbishment."

The response continued, "Although there have been some schedule delays - many of them, as noted by the IG, out of the program's control, we believe there will be no significant impact on full-scale production."

The issue of schedule delays is addressed in the audit.

"Some delays and deviations occurred due to circumstances outside NNSA's control," the IG acknowledged, but added that those circumstances have already been discounted from the report.

"Rather, this report addresses delays and scope deviations that were, in our judgment, directly related to weaknesses in project management," wrote the auditors.

The audit also describes an inability of three out of four sites to reconcile the costs reported to Congress or explain variances ranging from $200,000 to $2 million. The report criticizes inadequate documentation and coordination of changes in the plans.

The audit found an increase in the total cost, as of December 2004, through FY 2022 of $639 million or 28 percent of the estimated project cost, but noted that only $84 million of that amount is formally documented.

"According to an NNSA official," the authors reported, "efficient verbal communications made change control process documentation less necessary."

Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group pointed out that NNSA's response included a total cost estimate as of FY 2007 of $2.649 billion, which amounts to a five-year cost increase of 42 percent over the initial

projection of $1.86 billion.

The audit is published at a time when nuclear weapons managers and Congress are questioning the sustainability of the current system of stockpiling nuclear weapons. Some officials are proposing instead an alternative system, designed around a Reliable Replacement Warhead, that is supposed to be longer lasting and easier and less expensive to maintain.

The idea of stockpile stewardship, that grew out of the U.S. moratorium on nuclear testing, was to maintain a sufficient number of nuclear weapons that could be used over a longer lifetime without returning to nuclear testing.

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