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From the Los Angeles Times

New nukes need more work, panel says

U.S. weapons project needs to resolve technical issues and predict how the bomb would perform, outside experts tell Congress.

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October 2, 2007

An independent group of nuclear weapons experts said Monday that substantial work remained to be done on a new generation of warheads in order to show, short of underground testing, that the bombs would be reliable.

The National Nuclear Security Administration, a part of the Energy Department, is backing an effort by the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in Northern California to develop a hydrogen bomb that would replace parts of the existing Cold War-era stockpile.

The project has moved further than any U.S. nuclear weapons program in two decades. But in a recent report to Congress, the panel of outside experts said technical uncertainties in the manufacturing process and predictions about how the warhead would perform when detonated must be resolved before the bomb could be certified.

"Certification is not yet assured," said an unclassified summary of the JASON report, which also raised concerns about a plan to use new technology to make a stolen bomb useless should terrorists steal it. The report asked for an "improved physical understanding" of how the new system would work.

The push to develop a new weapon, known as the reliable replacement warhead, also has run into unexpected opposition in Congress. The Bush administration had requested \$89 million for the project in fiscal 2008, up from \$36 million a year ago. But a key House committee, followed by the full chamber, voted in June to eliminate all funding, saying the U.S. needs to reassess its nuclear weapons strategy.

Rep. Peter J. Visclosky (D-Ind.), chairman of the House appropriations subcommittee on energy and water development, said Monday that only after the agency had completed the panel's recommendations could Congress consider going ahead with the new weapon.

But Energy Department officials said the report actually confirmed that their technical approach to the new bomb was correct. "I am pleased that the JASON panel feels that we are on the right track," said Thomas D'Agostino, administrator of the nuclear security agency.

Separately, the government announced Monday that it dismantled three times as many old nuclear weapons as planned in fiscal 2007. President Bush in 2004 directed that the overall U.S. stockpile of nuclear weapons -- a classified number, but believed to be about 6,000 bombs -- be reduced 50% by 2012.

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