

FortWayne.com

Posted on Fri, Mar. 02, 2007

U.S. plans to build replacement hydrogen bomb

By Ralph Vartabedian
Los Angeles Times

The Energy Department will announce today a contract to develop the nation's first new hydrogen bomb in two decades, involving a collaboration between three national weapons laboratories, the Los Angeles Times has learned.

The new bomb would include design features from all three labs, though Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in the San Francisco Bay Area appears to have taken the lead position in the project. Los Alamos and Sandia national labs in New Mexico will also be part of the effort.

Teams of scientists in California and New Mexico have been working since last year to develop the new bomb, using the world's most powerful supercomputers. The bomb is known as the reliable replacement warhead, intended to replace aging warheads that are currently deployed on missiles aboard Trident submarines.

The contract decision was made by the Nuclear Weapons Council, consisting of officials from the Defense Department and the National Nuclear Security Administration, part of the Energy Department. Plans were under way Thursday to announce the contract award this afternoon. The nuclear administration will issue the contract and run the program.

The cost of the development is secret, though outside experts said it will cost billions of dollars – perhaps tens of billions – to develop the new bomb, build new factories to restart high-volume weapons production and then actually assemble the weapons.

The program is not expected to create a surge of employment at any of the labs.

The program would mark the first time that the military would field nuclear weapon design without an underground test. The last time scientists set off a hydrogen bomb was in 1991 under the Nevada desert. President Clinton ordered a moratorium on testing, a decision continued by President Bush.

Proponents of the reliable replacement warhead effort say the nation's existing nuclear stockpile is getting old and that doubts will eventually grow about the reliability of the weapons.

They say the new weapon would not have any greater nuclear yield and could not perform any new military missions beyond those of existing weapons.

So far, those arguments have attracted bipartisan support.

But critics say the existing stockpile is perfectly reliable and that it can be carefully maintained for decades. The new bomb would undermine U.S. efforts to stop nuclear proliferation, they add.

© 2007 Journal Gazette and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.fortwayne.com>