

U.S. Senate OKs \$66M for Reliable Replacement Warhead

By William Matthews

Senate appropriators voted June 28 to spend \$66 million on the Reliable Replacement Warhead in 2008.

That won't make President George W. Bush happy; he asked for \$88 million.

It won't make House appropriators happy either. They voted June 6 to spend zero on the controversial new nuclear weapon.

Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee on energy and water, made it clear that the Appropriations Committee intends for the \$66 million to be used only for warhead design work and cost studies.

Any work beyond that, such as development of parts or construction of a warhead, will require specific action from Congress, he said.

"I have issues with whether we should proceed at all," Dorgan said. First the U.S. government must decide what role nuclear weapons will play in the future, he said.

In a report on the Energy and Water Appropriations Bill that includes funds for nuclear weapons, the Senate Appropriations Committee wrote, "Specifically, we need to decide the type and size of our future inventory of nuclear weapons."

The U.S. has thousands of nuclear warheads and is obligated by treaties to reduce their numbers, the committee wrote. Decisions must be made on how and when to make reductions and whether to replace remaining warheads with Reliable Replacement Warheads, or RRWs.

Recent data indicates that existing warheads will last decades longer than expected, raising questions about whether they need to be replaced anytime soon.

Sen Pete Domenici, R-N.M., was more enthusiastic about the RRW program.

"We have fewer nuclear weapons today than we have had at any time since the Eisenhower administration," he said. "Now the suggestion is that we should develop a new safer," more reliable warhead.

"It is not a new nuclear weapon," but a replacement warhead that might enable the United States to even further reduce the number of warheads it maintains, he said.

Domenici acknowledged that there is wide support in Congress for a thorough evaluation of the future of U.S. nuclear weapons.

Senate appropriators also rejected the Energy Department's "premature deployment" of Complex 2030.