

# Nuclear Shorts

## DOE Report on Hazards of Pacific Island Plutonium Waste Dump Called “Flippant”

Between 1946 and 1958, the US performed 67 nuclear bomb test explosions in the Marshall Islands, equaling 1.6 Hiroshima-size explosions a day for twelve years. The Marshallese people were relocated away from testing sites, but did not escape the radioactive fallout that spread through the islands, causing burns, birth defects, and cancers. Some were purposely allowed to return to radioactive areas to inform US research. In the 1970s, over 110,000 cubic yards or 3.1 million cubic feet, of plutonium-contaminated soil and debris from the bomb tests were collected and abandoned on



**Graffiti on Runit Dome, a concrete cap over some 3 million cubic feet of plutonium contaminated waste from nuclear bomb tests, on Runit Island of the Marshall Islands, urges the United States to remove the toxins that were dumped into an unlined bomb crater by the US military. Photo: Mika Makelainen / Yle**

Runit Island under the “Runit Dome,” an unlined crater—left by a bomb test—covered with a concrete cap.

In 2019, Congress ordered the Department of Energy to address the threat of radioactive material leaking from Runit Dome, and to draft a repair plan. The DOE’s 2020 report claims the dome “is not in any immediate danger of collapse or failure,” but does admit that rising sea levels could affect the stability of the cracked concrete. Groundwater contamination could increase and, the report says, “no definitive data exists on how these events might impact the environment.” The DOE planned a groundwater radiochemical analysis program, though it’s now paused due to current travel restrictions. The DOE claims that rising levels of plutonium found in lagoon waters near the dome are due to existing contamination in sediments, not from materials spreading from the unlined crater. A dome repair plan was not included in the DOE report, although according to the World Health Organization the dome was never a long-term solution.

Since the report was based solely on US government data, critics have demanded an independent evaluation of the dome’s condition. US Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, D-Hawaii, and Rhea Moss-Christian, Chair of the Marshall Islands Nuclear Commission, accuse the DOE of downplaying the health and environmental risks posed by rising sea levels and storm surges on the dome’s decrepit concrete. Moss-Christian’s commission has condemned the lack of consultation between the DOE and independent scientists or the Marshallese people. The absence of data in the report makes it “disappointing,” said Rep. Gabbard, who even called it “flippant.” Moss-Christian said, “So my main takeaway from the report is that many risks are still ‘unknown.’” —*Guam Daily Post*, July 29; *Los Angeles Times*, July 27; and DOE “Report on the Status of Runit Dome,” June 2020.

## 14-Hour Fire May Have Wrecked Nuclear-Powered French Submarine

Fire broke out June 12 in France’s nuclear-powered submarine *La Perle* while it was in drydock in the Mediterranean port of Toulon. The submarine burned for 14 hours before firefighters extinguished the blaze, Reuters reported.

The fire was doused when foam was used to flood the sub’s rear compartments. Maritime officials said the *Perle*’s “reactor rooms remains untouched.” The French navy said that there were no casualties and no risk of radiation release “because the nuclear [re-

actor] fuel had been removed during the renovation of *Perle*,” the Agence France Presse (AFP) reported. “There was a fire, but no, there was not a nuclear accident,” said Defence Minister Florence Parly, according to AFP. “There was absolutely no nuclear fuel aboard and not a single weapon,” Parly said.

One of six French “attack” submarines assigned to hunt other subs and guard other nuclear-armed, long-range missile submarines, *Perle* did not carry nuclear weapons. Launched in 1993, *Perle* is already eligible for decommissioning, and the fire damage may force its retirement. —The National Interest, June 19; *Defense News*, June 16; Agence France Presse, and Reuters, June 13; and *Forbes*, June 12, 2020

## Moody’s Says Climate Crisis Threatens Nuclear Reactors

According to an August 18 report by Moody’s Investors Service, “over half” of US nuclear reactor generating capacity “face growing credit risks” in the next 10 to 20 years due to flooding, hurricanes, heat stress and other predicted impacts of climate change.

“The consequences of climate change can affect every

aspect ... from fuel handling and power and steam generation to maintenance, safety systems and waste processing,” the report said.

The highest risk or “red flag” category includes reactor sites that are “highly exposed to historical and/or projected risks,” Moody’s said. The report gives five nuclear stations the red flag because of potential floods. Another 13 reactor sites got red flags for heat stress. The threat of windstorms, sea-level rise, and water stress each put one reactor complex in the red flag category, because “proximity of power plants to large bodies of water leaves them vulnerable to flooding, hurricanes, and storm surges, which increases the risk of damage,” Moody’s said.

The simultaneous risks of earthquakes and tsunamis, such as devastated Fukushima-Daiichi in Japan in 2011, were not assessed in the report.

—Beyond Nuclear; and S&P Global, Aug. 18, 2020

## Ontario Reactor Operator Cancels Great Lakes Rad Waste Dump

Some 40 million Canadians and US residents who rely on the Great Lakes for fresh water are celebrating the June 24 cancellation of plans to dig a deep underground dump for radioactive waste near the shore of Lake Huron. The firm Ontario Power Generation (OPG) spent 16 years seeking approval for a dump on Bruce Peninsula northwest of Toronto, but it failed to sway public opinion or convince Canadian regulators that its half-mile deep “abandonment,” less than 1 mile from Lake Huron, could keep the waste’s radioactivity out of the drinking water.

After years of steadfast opposition by thousands of nuclear critics, scientists, community and political leaders from the Great Lakes region, hundreds of flaws were found in OPG’s applications and assessments and even the pro-nuclear Canadian government in Ottawa demanded better risk analysis from the firm.

Perhaps the last straw came Jan. 31, when the Sauguen Ojibway Nation overwhelmingly voted against the deep repository in a Community referendum. OPG earlier promised that it would not continue with the project if it did not have the First Nation’s backing. —*Detroit Free Press*, Beyond Nuclear, June 26, 2020

## 3rd ICBM War Rehearsal of 2020

On September 2 for the second time in under a month, a Minuteman III missile with multiple mock

nuclear warheads was test launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. It was the third such intercontinental missile test in 2020.

On August 4, two days prior to the 75th anniversary of the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima, the Air Force launched a Minuteman III missile from Vandenberg, also loaded with multiple mock nuclear warheads. Since the 1996 START II Treaty restrictions were adopted, long-range USAF missiles have each been limited to a single warhead each.

The latest test missile’s mock warheads traveled about 4,200 miles to a target on the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, the site of some 67 nuclear warhead test detonations during the ‘50s and ‘60s.

Rick Wayman, of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation in Santa Barbara, said, “We have decision makers who are willing and able to escalate nuclear threats even further by putting multiple warheads back on ICBMs—something that has not been done for decades.”

In a public statement, the Air Force said missile launch rehearsals show that its nuclear war plans are “safe, secure, reliable and effective.” Over the past 20 years, the Pentagon has rehearsed an average of three ICBM launches per year, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists. —Nuclear Age Peace Foundation; and Defense Brief online, Sept. 2; Union of Concerned Scientists, June 22, 2020

## Military Says Environmental Review Not Needed for New Plutonium Bomb Production

The Associated Press reports that, “The National Nuclear Security Administration says it doesn’t need to do an additional environmental review for Los Alamos National Laboratory before it begins producing [plutonium cores] for the nation’s nuclear arsenal because it has enough information. Watchdog groups are concerned about the announcement, saying the plutonium pit production work will amount to a vast expansion of the lab’s nuclear mission and that more analysis should be done. Los Alamos is preparing to resume and ramp-up production of the plutonium cores used to trigger nuclear weapons....” Author and activist Dr. Helen Caldicott called the decision “Absolute madness!” Greg Mello, Director of the Los Alamos Study Group said of the decision, “The notion that comprehensive environmental analysis is not needed for this gigantic program is a staggering insult to New Mexicans and an affront to any notion of environmental law and science.” —Associated Press; and Los Alamos Study Group, Sept. 2, 2020

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