



November 12, 2020

Dear Chairmen Inhofe and Smith, Ranking Members Reed and Thornberry,

Health professionals strongly oppose the resumption of explosive testing of U.S. nuclear weapons. Nuclear explosive testing has caused immense environmental and health issues, providing a clear demonstration of the risks inherent in testing. In addition, as Admiral Charles Richard, commander of U.S. Strategic Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee earlier this year, there is no technical or military need to conduct a nuclear explosive test. Doing so would have serious negative security consequences for the United States, and could endanger lives. University of Maryland polling in 2019 indicates that 86.8% of Americans approve of continuing the United States moratorium on nuclear tests. We urge you to retain Section 3121 of H.R. 6395, the House-passed Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) in the finalized conference version of this bill, which would prohibit funding for explosive nuclear testing. We also urge you to reject Section 3166 of the Senate-passed NDAA (S. 4049), which provides \$10 million to prepare for the resumption of explosive nuclear testing.

Previous nuclear weapons testing had deadly health consequences. The United States conducted over 1000 nuclear weapons tests between 1945 and 1992. Testing at the Nevada Test Site spread radioactive contamination across the entire country. A 1997 National Cancer Institute study estimated up to 212,000 excess cases of thyroid cancer resulting from the Nevada weapons tests. The U.S. tested 67 nuclear weapons in the Marshall Islands, resulting in the exposure of hundreds of Marshallese people. Some islands are so contaminated that they will never be inhabitable. Communities continue to be harmed from previous testing with many people continuing to suffer from cancers and other health impacts which sometimes appear decades after initial exposure. It would be a mistake for the United States to re-open the door to this kind of harm.

These environmental and health impacts were a main driver for the implementation of the Limited Test Ban Treaty, which banned atmospheric testing, and later the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which has been signed by 184 countries including the United States. While the United States has not ratified the CTBT, all signatories are obligated to abide by its terms. The United States has maintained a moratorium on nuclear weapons testing since 1992, and every other nation besides North Korea has maintained an explosive nuclear testing moratorium since 1998.

Many experts have also affirmed that there is no technical or military need for a nuclear test. The US Science-based Stockpile Stewardship Program uses a range of experimental facilities and powerful supercomputers to carry out non-nuclear tests on the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Since 1996, the Department of Energy (DOE) has conducted an annual assessment of the safety, reliability, and performance of each weapon type, as well as assessing whether it is necessary for any reason to conduct an explosive nuclear test. Each year since 1996, the DOE has determined that the arsenal remains safe, reliable and militarily effective and that explosive nuclear testing is not needed.

At this moment, we do not know what a resumption of nuclear testing would entail. We can assume, however, that it would be very low-yield, underground, and carried out with the intent to prevent any radiation exposure to workers or the general population. Despite this, there are reasons for concern:

- Previous underground tests have caused widespread radioactive contamination and exposure to the public. For example, the “Sedan” underground nuclear test in 1962 was the second most fallout-intensive nuclear test of all U.S. continental tests, spreading fallout as far as Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota and Illinois.
- It has always been the intention to ensure that nuclear tests did not expose people, but mistakes and accidents have happened. Both machines and humans are fallible, and so we cannot guarantee that an accident would not expose workers or nearby residents.
- If the United States were to resume testing, it could prompt resumption of testing by Russia and China, and perhaps also by North Korea, India, and Pakistan. Even if U.S. testing is underground and closely monitored, we cannot predict how other nuclear weapons states might test their weapons. This could open the door again to an era of devastating radiation exposure to civilians and environmental damage in other parts of the world.

Renewed testing would also undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The 185 non-nuclear weapons nations who have signed the NPT are already questioning the value of the NPT because the United States and other nuclear-armed countries have failed to make meaningful progress on their obligation, in Article VI of the NPT, “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.” A U.S. explosive nuclear test would further distance the United States from living up to this obligation and severely weaken the nuclear non-proliferation regime worldwide. This could lead to nuclear proliferation and a new nuclear arms race.

In conference negotiations, we, the undersigned strongly urge you to retain Section 3121 of H.R. 6395, the House-passed FY 2021 National Defense Authorization Act and reject Section 3166 of, S. 4049, the Senate-passed NDAA.

Sincerely,

(Affiliations are provided for identification purposes and do not imply institutional endorsement)

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