Although many decisions about nuclear weapons are made in Washington, DC rather than Washington State, state-level legislation taking a stance on issues or policies can still be very important in changing national and even international decisions on nuclear issues. This memo offers an overview of past state-level initiatives in Washington to reduce nuclear risks and identifies future steps the Washington legislature could take to further reduce nuclear risks.

Most of the United States’ submarine fleet armed with nuclear missiles is based at Kitsap/Bangor Naval Base, 20 miles west of Seattle. This naval base hosts the most deployed nuclear weapons anywhere in the United States. Although Kitsap/Bangor Naval Base brings many jobs to Washington State, the heavy presence of nuclear weapons here also makes the area a target for a nuclear attack from another country, and raises the risks that if an accident involving nuclear weapons occurred, nearby residents would be affected. Consequently, it is important for the Washington State Legislature to take steps to reduce nuclear risks.

Examples of past legislation and other efforts to reduce nuclear risks

The nuclear freeze movement was a grassroots movement in the early 1980s that advocated for a freeze on the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons in the United States. The Freeze was endorsed by 275 city governments and 12 state legislatures. None of these states or cities had the authority to stop the production or deployment of nuclear weapons on their own. However, these endorsements changed national politics: the Freeze became part of the Democratic Party platform in 1984 and (combined with other factors) led the Reagan administration to initiate arms control with
Russia in the START I and Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces treaties. Such state-level resolutions and legislation can have a real impact on changing national policy over time.

In 2020, the Washington State Senate adopted a resolution acknowledging the “painful and damaging” legacy of nuclear weapons testing in the Marshall Islands (SR 8701) and declared its support for Marshallese communities across Washington State. The resolution also recognized the link between Washington State and nuclear weapons testing in the Marshall Islands, noting that much of the plutonium used in nuclear weapons detonated in the Marshall Islands was processed at the Hanford nuclear reservation site in Washington State. By emphasizing the harmful legacy of nuclear weapons testing, this legislation contributes to stigmatizing nuclear testing. Moreover, it helps strengthen Marshallese claims for compensation and assistance from the US federal government for the long-term effects they bear as a result of US nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands.

**Options for future legislation (note: these are illustrative examples, not endorsements of any specific legislation)**

The Washington Legislature could ban or require voter approval of nuclear testing in Washington, as the state of Colorado did. The Colorado Detonation of Nuclear Devices amendment was a 1974 state constitutional amendment that required any nuclear testing or any nuclear detonations at all in Colorado to be approved by voters in advance. Nuclear weapons were never tested in Colorado, but nuclear explosive devices were used in Colorado in 1969 and 1973 to release natural gas. This was a complete failure economically and raised considerable concern in Colorado about the environmental and health impacts. The Denotation of Nuclear Devices amendment was a response to these concerns. Nuclear weapons testing has never occurred or been seriously proposed to take place in Washington state. But given that the United States has never ratified the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (which bans all nuclear explosive tests), such legislation would send a strong signal in support of banning nuclear testing---something that can have horrible and long-lasting environmental and health effects (as clearly seen in the Southwest and Pacific Islands).

The Hanford nuclear reservation site produced approximately 60 percent of the plutonium used in US nuclear weapons. Although the site was fully decommissioned in 1987, there exist today recurrent concerns over nuclear waste from the Hanford site leaking into the air and ground (as recently as April 2021). To address these concerns, the Washington Legislature could pass a bill urging Congress to authorize greater funding for cleaning up the Hanford site. The Washington Legislature could also commission its own study of the contemporary environmental and public health effects of the Hanford site.

The Washington Legislature could pass a bill in support of the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. This international treaty banned the development, testing, production, possession, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons. Fifty-four countries have ratified the treaty, but no country that possesses nuclear weapons has joined. Under the Trump administration, the United States was one of the leading opponents of the treaty. State legislatures in California, Oregon, Maine and New Jersey have followed with their own resolutions in support of the treaty, as have cities and towns in many states.
Earlier in 2021, Washington Representative (and chair of the House Armed Services Committee) Adam Smith reintroduced the No First Use Act, which would change the nuclear policy of the United States to not use nuclear weapons first (i.e., to not use nuclear weapons unless the United States is first attacked with nuclear weapons by another country). Representative Smith has introduced this legislation every year since 2017. The No First Use Act is intended to reduce nuclear risks by limiting the situations in which the United States would use nuclear weapons. Specifically, it is intended to reduce the risk of a miscalculation or misunderstanding by an adversary during a crisis that could lead them to use nuclear weapons. The Washington Legislature could pass a resolution in support of Representative Smith’s bill.

The Washington Legislature could pass a bill in support of a diplomatic approach to preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. In the leadup to the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (the JCPOA or ‘Iran deal’) in 2015, there was little state-level engagement in support of diplomacy. State-level legislation expressing support for diplomacy could have significantly helped build the case further at the national level. The Biden Administration is currently trying to re-enter the JCPOA. Regardless of the outcome, a bill of support for diplomacy in next year’s legislative session could help sustain support for diplomacy.

For questions or further information, contact: programs@trumanproject.org. The Truman Center for National Policy is an independent policy institute that brings together leaders from government, the private sector, and civil society to develop strong, smart and principled solutions to the global challenges Americans now face. As a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, the Truman Center is committed to developing policy ideas that advance the economic and national security interests of the United States.