

Nekoma ABM site may be axed

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WASHINGTON — The Clinton administration is considering shelving plans to deploy an anti-ballistic missile system in North Dakota as part of its long-range review of the nation's defense needs.

The administration earlier this year proposed delaying deployment of the system until at least 2004.

But one of the options being considered in the long-range review is to kill the deployment plans and limit the program to research, Pentagon officials told a Senate Armed Services subcommittee Wednesday.

The options range "from an acquisition program that produces a system on a date certain, to a research and development program," said Edward Gerry, systems architect for the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization.

The Defense Department review is expected to be finished by July 4, the officials said.

The ABM system, known as the National Missile Defense program, is designed to protect the continental United States from long-range nuclear missiles. Plans call for installing 100 interceptors at the antimissile site near Nekoma, N.D., that was abandoned during the 1970s.

James Woolsey, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, has predicted that some countries hostile to

the United States could have intercontinental missiles within eight to 15 years.

Congress originally wanted the antimissile system deployed by 1996.

The Clinton administration, however, decided to make a higher priority of developing "theater" nuclear missile systems to protect troops in war zones and put off the proposed deployment date for the Nekoma program.

Members of the committee pressed the administration to step up the pace in developing both programs.

"We want these programs now, and if not now, then soon and urgently soon," said Sen. James Exon, D-Neb. Exon, the subcommittee chairman, warned that the programs may be killed if they don't produce results soon.

"Don't you think we should have a higher priority for National Missile Defense?" asked Sen. Trent Lott, D-Miss.

"We think we should have the highest priority for National Defense, yes, sir," said Major Gen. Malcolm O'Neill, acting director of BMDO, formerly known as the Strategic Defense Initiative.

However, he said later that the administration still believed that theater missile defenses were more important than the Nekoma system.