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Fearing Theft, U.S. Plans To Relocate Nuclear Fuel

By MATTHEW L. WALD

WASHINGTON, Aug. 11 — The United States is moving rapidly toward shipping tons of bomb-grade plutonium and uranium out of a vulnerable laboratory in New Mexico, according to Energy Department officials and internal documents. Experts said it would be the first time the government has moved nuclear weapons fuel to reduce the risk of terrorists stealing it.

The plutonium and uranium would be shipped to a complex at the Nevada Test Site, about 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas, that was formerly used to assemble nuclear devices for detonation. It would be taken from a place called Technical Area 18, or T.A.-18, at Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory.

Several internal Energy Department documents describing the plan were obtained by a nonprofit group based here, the Project on Government Oversight, which has been lobbying for better security at nuclear weapons sites.

In one document, the director of Los Alamos wrote on June 28 to a deputy administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration that the laboratory supported moving the material as "the best overall decision to meet the post-September 11th challenges for the long-term security of nuclear activities."

The National Nuclear Security Administration is the part of the Energy Department that manages the inventory of weapons, weapons components and weapons fuel.

The Project on Government Oversight has previously released documents that show that T.A.-18 has performed poorly in security drills. According to one document, a team sent to play terrorists in 1997 used a cart from Home Depot to remove 200 pounds of simulated bomb fuel.

The laboratory, with some buildings that are 50 years old, is at the bottom of a shallow canyon in a spot experts say is difficult to defend.

The documents released by the Project on Government Oversight include a draft of an Energy Department news release announcing that an environmental impact statement on the move had been completed and that the Nevada Test Site is the preferred location. An official at the Energy Department said that the assessment was not finished but that "the department is heading in that direction."

Peter Stockton, who was special assistant to the last energy secretary in the Clinton administration, Bill Richardson, said Mr. Richardson had worked for two years to get the weapons material out of the area but had been stymied by bureaucrats at the department. Officials are often reluctant to give up weapons materials, Mr. Stockton and others say, because it means a loss of prestige and resources for their programs.

"It is the first time that it's ever been moved for security reasons," Mr. Stockton said. "There are multiple tons of plutonium and high enriched uranium, certain other things down there you wouldn't want a terrorist to get his hands on," he said.

Representative Edward J. Markey, Democrat of Massachusetts, who has been a critic of security at the energy agency, said he was pleased that the department may be taking steps to remove the material.

"Al Qaeda terrorists are fully capable of taking advantage of poor security at D.O.E. facilities if they remain unaddressed," Mr. Markey said.