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LEADING THE NEWS

Security at Los Alamos Is Criticized

U.S. Officials Urge Moving Lab's Nuclear Materials To Remote Military Site

By JOHN J. FIALKA

WASHINGTON—Heightened security concerns have convinced the Department of Energy that weapons-grade materials at one of its most heavily guarded nuclear facilities should be transferred to a remote military site in the Nevada desert.

The decision comes after a series of war games demonstrated that a small group armed with military weapons could penetrate the Los Alamos National Laboratory's robust fortifications and expensively equipped security force—and even snatch its portable stocks of plutonium and uranium.

In a letter to Everet Beckner, who heads defense programs at the DOE's National Nuclear Security Agency, John C. Browne, director of Los Alamos in New Mexico, said laboratory and DOE officials agree that a transfer to the Nevada Test Site is "the best overall decision to meet the post-September 11th challenges." The lab is run by the University of California, which hires private contractors to guard the facilities.

Bryan Wilkes, a spokesman for the security agency, said no final decision on the transfer can be made until the NNSA files an environmental-impact statement supporting it. But he confirmed the contents of the letter, dated June 28, and said the Nevada site—located within the Nellis Air Force Range—is now the agency's "preferred alternative." Peter Stockton, a nuclear-weapons security expert for the Project on Government Oversight, which obtained a copy of the letter, called it "the most sensible" step DOE has taken to counter its vulnerability to terrorism.

The decision comes as the Bush administration's director of homeland security, Tom Ridge, holds sector-by-sector interviews with officials from industries especially prone to attack—water, chemical and nuclear-power plant sites among them. Those talks are part of an effort to get them to upgrade their security in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

TA-18, as the site within the Los Alamos complex is known, shows how potential security problems can quietly mushroom. When it was established in the bottom of a steep, remote canyon in 1944, the main concern of its planners was getting it completed quickly and safely. Scientists used it to model various types of nuclear weapons: They employed a stock of plutonium and highly enriched uranium in varying shapes

and sizes to determine how and when a weapon of a certain configuration would start a chain reaction, and release a sudden burst of lethal radiation.

But in the 1970s, after a public road was built near TA-18, security experts began wondering how they might protect it against terrorists.

DOE and its contractors use what they call "layered defenses" to protect critical facilities. Nuclear materials at TA-18 are kept in a vault; the last layer of protection involved putting the blocks into canisters that were thought to be too heavy for an attacker to carry away.

In the early 1990s the DOE began holding so-called force-on-force exercises, sometimes bringing in small Army Special Forces units to play the role of attackers. During a midnight exercise on April 12, 1997, these attackers overwhelmed the guards, penetrated the vault and used a simple garden cart, found at the site, to trundle off some simulated canisters.

That outcome provoked a spasm of security upgrades, more guards and more guard training, and a surge of new equipment including armor-plated Humvees equipped with 50-caliber machine guns. Security costs for the small

facility ballooned to between \$12 million and \$18 million a year, all of it ultimately borne by taxpayers.

On Oct. 5, 2000, the beefed-up defenders of TA-18 suffered a second setback. The mock attackers mounted snipers on the surrounding hills to "kill" arriving guard reinforcements. Meanwhile, the "terrorists" penetrated the vault and had enough time and the proper simulated equipment to blow up the nuclear materials with conventional explosives, creating a reaction that would, at the least, poison the surrounding area with long-lived radioactive debris.

After that, the internal debate revived over whether to move TA-18 to the Nevada Test Site, to a building called the Device Assembly Facility once used by to assemble experimental nuclear weapons before they were tested. It has been vacant since 1992 when the tests stopped, but it has state-of-the-art defenses. Besides being extremely well fortified, the facility sits on a vast plain that makes it easy to spot approaching intruders.

Until recently, officials at Los Alamos preferred to keep TA-18 closer to the weapons laboratories, and the technicians and scientists who worked



there also resisted the move, preferring to live in the large New Mexico scientific community rather than relocate to the Nevada desert.

An unsigned note that accompanied the Browne letter indicates the scientists were still resisting this year, requesting "multiple studies with long time periods." The note suggests Dr. Beckner, the NNSA's third-ranking official, was tired of their arguments. He wanted the most sensitive nuclear material removed from TA-18 "ASAP."