

Los Alamos loses director under cloud of scandals

By Michael Kilian
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WASHINGTON—The head of the Los Alamos National Laboratory and his deputy are leaving their posts at the helm of the scandal-ridden facility in the wake of charges of widespread theft, fraud and security lapses, officials announced Thursday.

The outgoing director, John Browne, is a physicist who has been in the job since 1997.

Among charges being investigated by the FBI, the Department of Energy and Congress are that the top-secret nuclear research center is missing \$2.9 million in equipment, including 263 computers that may contain classified information. A recent audit found potentially \$5 million in fraud involving lab-issued credit cards.

In 1999, the laboratory was embarrassed when one of its scientists, Wen Ho Lee, was accused of stealing nuclear secrets and jailed for nine months, though the government never brought an espionage case against him.

The New Mexico facility, which is managed by the University of California on behalf of the Energy Department, has played a legendary role in history. It figured in the creation of the atomic bomb and is a principal steward of the nation's nuclear arsenal.

But in recent years, the lab has been tarnished by allegations of wrongdoing and waste.

Two officials assigned to look into the matters—Glenn Walp, head of the lab's Office of Security Inquiries, and Steven Doran, staff investigator—were fired in November and not replaced.

After some of their findings became public, the FBI and Energy Department launched investigations that included the possibility of an official cover-up at the laboratory.

In the post-Sept. 11 era, with the security of the nation's weapons programs under heightened scrutiny, the alleged sloppiness and fraud prompted a loud outcry for reforms.

Managerial change hailed

Browne and Deputy Director Joseph Salgado depart Monday. Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham hailed the "sweeping management changes."

"For 60 years, the scientists and engineers of Los Alamos have played a vital role in ensuring the security of the United States," he said. "It is crucial that we restore public confidence in the management of the laboratory so that they can continue to play that role."

"The nation needs the same confidence in the business management and security at Los Alamos as it has in the laboratory's weapons design and basic science," Abraham added.

In an announcement, University of California President Richard Atkinson called Browne's departure "a mutual decision."

He added that "Browne deserves full credit for recognizing that recent allegations regarding [Los Alamos] business practices were distracting from his many accomplishments and

the work of the laboratory's extraordinary scientific community."

Outside observers applauded the change.

In a statement, Reps. Billy Tauzin (R-La.), chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, and James Greenwood (R-Pa.), who heads its oversight and investigations subcommittee, said they were "encouraged" by the "management shake-up."

"We applaud Secretary Abraham for sending a strong signal that he will not tolerate business as usual at the labs and for taking these aggressive steps that hopefully will improve accountability," they said.

Tauzin and Greenwood said their committee had received 17 boxes of documents from Los Alamos and the University of California's auditors that the panel will review in investigating Los Alamos.

Danielle Brian, executive director of the Washington-based civilian watchdog group Project on Government Oversight, called the departure of Browne and Salgado "an encouraging first step," but added that "it's not enough."

"There are more than 260 computers out there and no one knows where they are or what's on them," she said. "The laboratory insists there is no record of classified information being on the computers, but that's because they have no record of any kind as to what's on them."

"All signs indicate that leaders at Los Alamos were motivated in the firing [of Walp and Doran] by a desire to silence these and other individuals who are uncovering widespread corrup-

tion," said Brian, whose organization made public much of the information that prompted the federal inquiries of Los Alamos.

Security lapses cited

Los Alamos' management had also drawn criticism for security lapses at its TA-18 nuclear weapons testing facility, which is used to prepare defenses against possible terrorist nuclear attacks and to train emergency personnel.

Situated in an exposed canyon, the complex has shown security deficiencies in mock attack exercises, including one in which a team infiltrated and made off with an object equal in size to a nuclear weapon.

Though Browne said a year ago that security at TA-18 was adequate—an assertion repeated last summer by Los Alamos security chief Stanley Busboom—plans are under way to move the unit to a more secure location at the government's sprawling Nevada Test Site.

Security staff at Los Alamos and other federal nuclear weapons laboratories was reduced by nearly 40 percent between 1992 and Sept. 11, 2001, according to a report released in August by Rep. Edward Markey (D-Mass.).

The General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, is undertaking a separate investigation of nuclear lab security, with a report expected early this year.

Retired Vice Adm. George "Pete" Nanos, former commander of the Navy's strategic nuclear program, will become the interim director. He now is principal deputy associate director for the Los Alamos Threat Reduction Directorate.



Browne