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Nuclear Lab Safety Official Is Suspended

Los Alamos aide had pushed a probe into the unauthorized storage of plutonium.

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Energy Department officials have suspended a key safety manager at Los Alamos National Laboratory without explanation after he pushed an investigation into unsafe storage of plutonium and other safety problems at the nuclear weapons research center.

Christopher Steele, a 10-year veteran at the New Mexico facility, had aggressively pursued an investigation into the lab's use of an unauthorized steel shed to store plutonium-contaminated waste for five years. Until the material was moved in 2001, the lab failed to take measures to ensure that the radioactive materials would not be released in a fire or earthquake, according to Energy Department documents.

Energy Department officials, finding a serious safety breach that could have jeopardized the public, assessed a \$220,000 fine in late December.

Steele's suspension comes as the lab, run by the University of California under contract with the Energy Department, is under intense federal scrutiny because of allegations of mismanagement and financial

irregularities. Two investigators who were looking into those matters contend they were fired by the lab in November as part of a cover-up. UC rehired the investigators this month.

The Energy Department, stung by that controversy, is considering whether to break UC's contract to run Los Alamos and two other labs. UC officials are in Washington this week to discuss the problems at Los Alamos, among other issues, with department officials and members of Congress.

Scrambling to retain the contract, the university already has reassigned or replaced half a dozen senior officials at the lab, including lab director John C. Browne, who resigned earlier this month.

Some congressional leaders are worried that the lab and the Energy Department are trying to keep the lid on additional embarrassing disclosures.

"We know that part of the unhealthy culture there is that if you rock the boat and make the university look bad, you're fired," said Rep. James Greenwood (R-Pa.), who chairs the House oversight subcommittee that is investigating the lab. "If that's the case in this instance [involving Steele], we'd certainly be concerned about it."

The suspension of Steele, unlike the firings of the investigators in November, was carried out by the Energy Department, not by the lab or by UC.

Steele, a nuclear engineer with a degree from the Massa-
[See Lab, Page B10]

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[Lab, from Page B1]

chusetts Institute of Technology, was in charge of ensuring that the lab met federal nuclear facility requirements. He works for the Energy Department's National Nuclear Security Administration, which oversees the nation's nuclear weapons complex.

Energy Department officials put Steele on administrative leave in November after he had raised concerns about the unauthorized storage facility and broader questions about safety procedures involving the handling of radioactive materials, according to department memos and other internal documents.

In an interview, Steele said he was never told why he was being suspended.

"I am on paid administrative leave until they do a review. I have not been formally accused of anything," he said, declining to comment further.

Dennis Martinez, the Energy Department's second-ranking official at the lab site, said Steele was put on paid leave for reasons unrelated to his investigation of the unauthorized plutonium storage facility, but he declined to provide any other explanation.

Meanwhile, lab and UC officials say they had no involvement with his suspension, adding that they considered Steele good at his job.

Steele's suspension was disclosed by the Project on Government Oversight, a nonprofit Washington watchdog group that has made public a wide range of information about problems at Los Alamos. The group was involved in publicizing the allegations of financial irregular-

ities at the lab and the investigator firings in November.

Peter Stockton, an investigator for the group, said it appears the Energy Department suspended Steele for his advocacy on safety issues. He explained that Steele had withheld approval of the lab's safety practices relating to the handling of radioactive material. The federal government strengthened those requirements after earlier lapses — including the lab's handling of a security violation by scientist Wen Ho Lee.

Stockton said he believes Energy Department officials are attempting to silence Steele with "a trumped-up security violation," which Stockton said involved Steele's handling of a classified e-mail within the lab. The lab official who sent the e-mail failed to properly classify it, although Steele was held accountable for the error, said Stockton, who was an Energy Department investigator during the Clinton administration.

Steele was suspended for several weeks about 18 months ago during an investigation into that security issue, although he was later returned to his job, Stockton said.

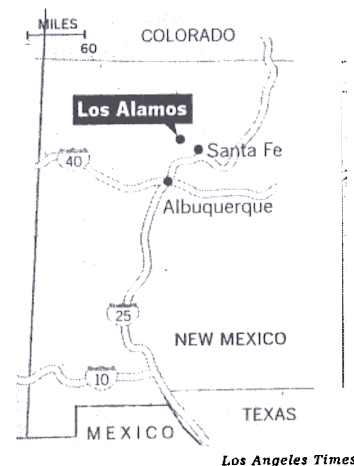
Although lab officials say they played no role in Steele's suspension, they have long disputed his allegations about the unauthorized storage facility. In a September 2001 memo to Steele, a lab division director called his allegations a "misrepresentation of facts."

Steele's advocacy on safety issues had infuriated lab officials — technically UC employees — and they in turn had complained about him to Energy Depart-

ment officials, documents show. In e-mails between lab managers and department officials, obtained by The Times, a senior lab official said she was at "wit's end" over Steele's aggressive conduct, while another complained about his "confrontational ways."

In interviews with The Times, lab officials stressed that they told the Energy Department about the storage violation in June 2001, as soon as they became aware of it. The officials said they could not explain why the problem went undiscovered for so long.

Steele's concerns about the plutonium storage were laid out in an August 2001 memo to senior lab officials.



He raised objections to the lab's effort to obtain retroactive approval to store up to 44 pounds of plutonium inside the barrels. (Lab officials now say

less plutonium was stored there.)

Housing even a few pounds of plutonium would have required what is called a "Class II nuclear facility," which under U.S. law must undergo risk assessments for fires, earthquakes, aircraft crashes, potential for accidental nuclear detonation and other events, according to the documents and interviews.

A breach of the storage barrels could result in the airborne release of plutonium.

"I am personally concerned about the seriousness of the circumstances surrounding this matter," wrote Linton F. Brooks, the Energy's Department's chief for nuclear weapons, in a Dec. 17 letter to the lab. He termed it "fortuitous that no unanticipated events occurred that would have caused ... significant exposures to the public or workers."

The shed, designated at the lab as PF-185, had steel walls and 2,175 square feet of space. It was 20 feet from a diesel fuel pump, which is a fire hazard, and contained various combustible materials, according to Energy Department and lab documents.

The waste included articles of clothing, tools, papers and other items that had been contaminated with plutonium and other radioactive waste, according to the documents and energy officials.

Martinez, the Energy Department official at the site, said plutonium waste is normally stored at a designated lab site known as Area 54. The buildings there have sprinkler systems, for instance, unlike the PF-185 shed, he said.