

Los Alamos loses plutonium

Watchdog group discloses latest lapse at laboratory

By Michael Kilian
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WASHINGTON—The troubled Los Alamos National Laboratory acknowledged Wednesday that it had lost a "small" quantity of weapons-grade plutonium and that a search for the material is under way.

The New Mexico nuclear lab's admission came in response to disclosures earlier in the day of the loss by the Project on Government Oversight, a Washington-based watchdog group that accused the Department of Energy of failing to keep adequate track of nuclear weapons material.

Last month, Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham said he was taking measures that could lead to removing control of the Los Alamos facility from the University of California.

The university has run the top-secret lab without competitive bidding since it was created in 1943 as part of the Manhattan Project, the U.S. effort to build the first atomic bomb during World War II.

In his announcement, Abraham cited lax security, fiscal mismanagement and other problems.

Quoting "sources" associated with the lab, the Project on Gov-

ernment Oversight said Wednesday that a container holding 2 grams of plutonium had been missing two years, but that this was not reported to the Energy Department until last week.

Although the amount lost is small, it should be considered dangerous, the group said. Two grams is clearly less than it takes to build a bomb, but plutonium is highly toxic and carcinogenic.

The lab is undertaking a full materials inventory.'

—Kevin Roark, Los Alamos spokesman

"Even these small quantities of missing plutonium are a potential threat to public health and safety and are taken very seriously," the oversight group said in a statement.

"The fact that the missing material was not reported is a violation of department policy and raises serious questions about the level of confidence in the DOE's material control and accountability system that tracks hundreds of tons of weapons-grade nuclear material," the statement said.

Los Alamos Director George "Pete" Nanos said the missing material does not pose a great danger.

"This material has scientific and analytical research value, but is in a low hazard-and-threat

category," Nanos said.

Describing the substance as "two low-purity analytical samples of plutonium-oxide," lab spokesman Kevin Roark said the exact amount could not be disclosed "due to security requirements."

Roark said the loss was discovered June 12 and followed by a "full sweep" of the areas where the samples were thought to be located. Because the plutonium was not found, the lab is undertaking a "full materials inventory," he said.

Roark also said lab authorities believe the substance may have been disposed of properly as nuclear "residue," using safe containers and procedures, but could have been misidentified in records.

"We will use this discovery to build more robust procedures and quality processes into our material accountability systems," Nanos said.

"The lessons learned in this instance will help us in our continuing efforts to achieve operational excellence and process improvement," he added.

According to an Energy Department report, 12 Los Alamos workers were exposed to plutonium in April because of improper handling.

Nanos has served as interim director of the facility since January, when Director John Browne and Deputy Director Joseph Salgado resigned after disclosures of fraud, theft, loss of classified information and other security lapses at the lab.