

Feds consider shuttering Livermore plutonium facility

Execs say losing Superblock would be a death knell to the lab's nuclear weapons mission

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The federal government is talking about closing Superblock, the plutonium facility at Lawrence Livermore lab, and the lab's main explosives testing area, Site 300 — moves that would end nearly a half-century of secret work on nuclear weapons components at both places.

Shuttering Superblock and Site 300 could be a decade or more away, according to documents obtained by the Oakland Tribune, and would come only after the federal government had spent more than \$30 million on safety improvements neglected in recent decades at the fortress-like Superblock, which opened in 1961.

Prospects for the closures came as a shock to Livermore weapons officials and would mark a dramatic change for the weapons lab. Its scientists would move away from hands-on, day-to-day work with bomb quantities of weapons plutonium and uranium, and toward more virtual weapons work relying on supercomputer simulations and miniaturized nuclear tests on the lab's giant laser, the National Ignition Facility.

Federal officials stress that no final decisions have been made. Bryan Wilkes, a spokesman for the National Nuclear Security Administration, said federal weapons executives are planning for "multiple scenarios" in response to budget pressures in Congress and a series of reports suggesting the government pull its scattered tons of weapons materials into one or a few well-guarded locations, possibly underground.

Federal officials acknowledge that they don't expect to defeat a full, Sept. 11-sized terrorist attack on a weapons facility until 2008.

"It's way past due, and we simply have to do something about it quickly before they sink a bunch of money into places that cannot be protected," said Peter Stockton, investigator for the Project on Government Oversight and former chief security adviser to Clinton Energy Secretary Bill Richardson. Livermore is such a place, critics say, surrounded by so many homes that its guards cannot be given the heavy firepower needed to keep large numbers of attackers out of Superblock.

During an internal planning meeting in April for the U.S. nuclear weapons complex, senior government managers called for an "exit strategy" for both Superblock and Site 300, according to documents presented at the meeting in Kansas City.

The closing of Superblock would come "in 10 years," the documents said, after Los Alamos replaces one of its oldest weapons facilities, the Chemistry and Metallurgical Research Building, a hulking

chemistry lab for bomb materials built in the late 1950s. Almost no progress has been made on funding a smaller, more modern lab to replace it.

Livermore executives have fought the loss of Superblock and its stores of plutonium and highly enriched uranium, amounting to a few hundred atom bombs' worth, portraying it as a death knell for the lab's nuclear weapons mission.

They argue it is essential for Livermore scientists to have ready access to weapons plutonium and uranium. But a recent high-level security review performed for the National Nuclear Security Administration suggested arguments such as those were "more for convenience than necessity" and overweighed by mounting difficulty in protecting weapons materials at multiple sites nationwide.

In a report released last week, experts led by retired Admiral Richard Mies found that security in the U.S. weapons complex remains "plagued by a number of cultural problems," including a "bias against training," a lack of accountability and a tendency to let contractors operating weapons sites assess their vulnerability to terrorist attack.

None of the dozens of findings and recommendations in the Mies report specifically mention Livermore or its plutonium inventory. But the report concludes that "moving this material to more secure and remote sites, and bringing the scientists and mission to the material, would decrease the number of storage locations and consolidate SNM (special nuclear materials) in more secure, unpopulated areas."

If closed, Superblock's work could go to New Mexico and its sister lab counterpart at Los Alamos, known as Technical Area 55, or to a new plutonium plant deep inside either the desert Nevada Test Site or Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory.