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UC alone didn't ruin Los Alamos

By Nick Schwellenbach

The latest rash of security problems at Los Alamos National Laboratory has led many to concentrate on the culpability of the University of California System.

Why?

First, as manager of the lab for the Department of Energy, UC is the most obvious entity to point the finger at. Second, the lab's management contract is up for competitive bid in 2005 for the first time in more than 60 years. The UT, Texas A&M and UC systems, along with 10 private companies (Lockheed Martin has since bowed out of the race, citing the costs of the bid) have formally expressed interest with the DOE.

These scandals at Los Alamos do not help UC in maintaining management, and they make UC's competitors look like good alternatives. The LA Times has called for UC not to even bother with the embarrassment of competing, and a senator has written legislation to prevent UC from bidding. But simply bashing UC oversimplifies the complex problem.

Security problems at Los Alamos are not solely the fault of the University of California; the National Nuclear Security Administration, a semi-autonomous agency within the Energy Department created to tighten security across America's nuclear weapons complex, is also to blame.

At a congressional hearing in mid-July, just after Los Alamos revealed that two zip disks with classified information were missing, Rep. Jim Greenwood, R-Pa., said, "[T]oday's testimony will demonstrate that the NNSA experiment has not been a great success."

NNSA has largely escaped the wrath of the media that has plagued the lab and UC, but the NNSA over the last four years has been uncritical of the lab's security. It has repeatedly given Los Alamos a "satisfactory" rating, the highest rating possible, turning a blind eye to problems that continued through these years. The NNSA isn't doing its job. It makes you wonder why, all of a sudden, NNSA chief Linton Brooks is slamming the lab. Could it be because Congress is starting to show its teeth?

Speaking to Congress about Los Alamos, Brooks has said, "They devalue the things you need in order to do good science. They devalue business management. They devalue security." If Brooks is right, why hasn't the NNSA stepped in? Where were these complaints before the zip disks went missing? Brooks also stated, in what can be taken as a threat, "[T]here is something about the Los Alamos culture that we have not beaten into submission." S. Robert Foley, UC vice president for laboratory management, has opined that at Los Alamos, "When they did something wrong, it was 'musical chairs': They could move from one job to another [at the lab]. People didn't get fired ... and that's intolerable."

"Musical chairs" is an apt metaphor, but it's ironic that Foley uses the phrase. UC, Foley's employer, has hired two former NNSA officials to run aspects of the weapons program at Los Alamos - men who oversaw the lab while in government service. The same "culture of arrogance" at Los Alamos exists at NNSA and at UC, preventing security at sites meant to provide national security.

To simplify the problems at Los Alamos is to avoid fixing them. Although it may be politically savvy and easier for some to concentrate on UC's responsibility for the long-standing problems, the situation is much worse. Rather than delay fixing the problems, we should widen the lens with

which we see them.

Schwellenbach, a fellow at the Project On Government Oversight, is a UT alum and former member of UT Watch. He has been active in opposing a possible UT bid for Los Alamos.
