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Classified E-Mail Left Nuclear Lab

Secret information at the Los Alamos weapons facility was repeatedly sent over the Internet.

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Los Alamos National Laboratory officials have discovered in recent weeks that secret information at the nuclear weapons facility was repeatedly transmitted over an unclassified e-mail system.

Officials at the New Mexico lab confirmed Sunday that the incidents were reported to Energy Department headquarters in Washington, and said that they were taking measures to improve security and "prevent significant risks to national security."

The breakdown marks yet another case of lax internal security at the lab, which is run by the University of California. In one other instance, at least two computer disks containing sensitive weapons information were discovered missing July 7 from the facility.

Top Energy Department officials arrived at the lab Sunday to begin an investigation of the

problems, which had prompted an indefinite suspension Friday of all lab activities. Among other items, the officials are planning to examine a report that 19 electronic storage devices with classified data are also missing, according to a lab memo dated Thursday.

Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham asserted last week that lab employees were engaged in "widespread disregard of security procedures." The unusually tough language reflects Abraham's inability to stop scandals at the remote facility.

The latest security crisis comes after more than a decade of turmoil at the lab and general management failures that have also included financial fraud, violations of nuclear safety and the illegal firing of employees who blew the whistle on potential problems.

The improper use of e-mail "goes to the heart of why we are suspending activities here," said James Fallin, director of public affairs at the lab. "It is a lack of attention to detail. It is exactly why lab director [Pete] Nanos has said we are going to stop everything."

Fallin said he could not discuss specifics about the e-mails.

[See Lab, Page A9]

Nuclear Weapons Lab Shuts Down All Activity

[Lab, from Page A1]
particularly their content.

"Without discussing specifics, all matters or incidents associated with unclassified e-mails and classified information have been properly reported to NNSA [the National Nuclear Security Administration] and have been properly mitigated to prevent significant risks to national security," Fallin said.

Because U.S. defense facilities are subject to almost daily cyber security attacks, the government presumes that hackers can access information that is not carefully guarded.

The lab has different e-mail systems that are used based on the sensitivity of the information being transmitted.

In the case of the most highly classified weapons information, scientists use a "red" system that is physically disconnected from outside networks, including the Internet. Less sensitive information is routed to a "yellow" system, and the least sensitive information uses a "green" system that is connected to the outside networks.

The new problem involving e-mail was disclosed by the Project on Government Oversight, a public policy organization based in Washington that has been investigating security

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problems at nuclear facilities for several years. The group said it had obtained information that 17 classified e-mails were sent over the Internet, although exactly what was in those e-mails is not known.

"The worst thing I could think of is that we have a problem with one of our weapons systems," said Peter Stockton, an investigator for the group who previously worked on laboratory security for the Energy Department during the Clinton administration.

Speculation has grown that the flurry of security breakdowns may involve a problem with U.S. warheads, although Los Alamos officials strongly disputed recent allegations by a former scientist at the lab who said there were defects in one bomb design.

"The lab is absolutely certain about the reliability of the warheads," Fallin said.

Concern over lax security at Los Alamos was raised most recently by the disclosure by the lab's director this month that two disks containing classified

nuclear weapons information were lost. The loss of the disks was discovered during preparations for an experiment in the weapons physics division.

The incident recalls the case of Wen Ho Lee, a Los Alamos weapons scientist who created a personal library of secret nuclear weapons information at his home.

An investigation that began in 1996 disclosed that Lee had classified tapes describing miniature nuclear warheads. Although Lee was indicted on 59 felony counts, the case unraveled and he ultimately pleaded guilty to a single count of mishandling classified data.

After the Lee case, Los Alamos was again embarrassed when it lost two disk drives that were later discovered behind an office copying machine.

Nanos has charged that current security breaches reflect the careless attitudes of what he described as "cowboys" who refuse to follow procedures.

Whether those individuals are renegades trying to embar-

ass Nanos or careless geniuses who can't keep their e-mail straight is one of the questions that officials want to investigate.

Among the items high on the lab's agenda this week are the 19 other missing storage devices. The July 15 memo indicated that the devices, classified removable electronic media, or CREM, were among 34 devices in a package, according to the memo. Officials were planning to conduct a "wall-to-wall" search.

In May, Abraham unveiled a major effort to improve security involving electronic data at weapons labs, including Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, the other U.S. design center for nuclear weapons.

The effort includes eliminating all removable computer storage media, including tape and disk drives, that contain highly sensitive weapons information. Such a step has been advocated by outside experts for several years. Abraham's program would also include eliminating all physical keys for doors and locks, replacing them with electronic systems.

"We are all too familiar with reports of poor performance ... of sleeping on the job and repeatedly losing keys," he said. "They are unacceptable and will not be tolerated."