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Arms Official Brushes Off A Complaint About Audit

By MATTHEW L. WALD

WASHINGTON, July 4 — The top nuclear weapons official at the Energy Department has brushed aside a complaint by the department's inspector general that some employees were instructed not to "spill your guts" when questioned in a security investigation.

The official, Linton F. Brooks, head of the National Nuclear Security Administration, a semiautonomous agency within the department, said in an internal memorandum to officials at nine Energy Department sites that the inspector general's office had taken an "erroneous message" from the training documents given to employees.

"The inspector general interpreted these comments as discouraging full cooperation with the inspection team," Mr. Brooks said in the June 19 memorandum. "Upon review, this perception turns out to be incorrect."

The inspector general, Gregory H. Friedman, reported in January that employees at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico had been told in a training course to be careful what they said to security inspectors or what they wrote down.

The training materials for employees facing an audit on computer security said: "Handwritten notes can be especially damaging. They are not easily disavowed."

Mr. Brooks's memorandum said that those instructions were "appropriate cautions" and had been misinterpreted by the inspector general.

His memorandum was provided to The New York Times by the Project on Government Oversight, a group that has often publicized Energy Department employees' security complaints. Peter Stockton, a senior investigator with the group and a former security adviser to the energy secretary, said in an interview that the memorandum was outrageous.

"When you're doing an investigation," Mr. Stockton said, "you do indeed want people to spill their guts and to suggest to you who is responsible for things."

He added that the memorandum sounded like something a defense lawyer would tell a client and not something from an official who wanted a successful inquiry.

A spokesman for Mr. Brooks, Bryan Wilkes of the National Nuclear Security Administration, said the memorandum "was written to make it absolutely clear that there should be no doubts" that all Energy Department and contractor employees should cooperate with investigations.

"What he was trying to say," Mr. Wilkes said, "is that even the perception of lack of cooperation is unacceptable. Far from undercutting the inspector general, this letter is meant to support the inspector general. Parts can be open for misunderstanding, I guess."

In a footnote, the memorandum said the warning not to "spill your guts" was a caution "against providing information in areas beyond an individual's responsibility," that the warning about writing was meant to emphasize "the importance of proper classification" and that the warning against finger pointing was to discourage "blaming others for shortcomings uncovered in an audit."

Mr. Brooks said in the memorandum that the inspector general had taken the cautions out of context. But he added that "there is an affirmative obligation to help the auditors discover the facts" and that the training material should have said

so.

A spokeswoman for the inspector general, Wilma Slaughter, said after a copy of the memorandum was faxed to her on Thursday, "We stand by reports as written, and the findings are accurate."

Ms. Slaughter said Mr. Friedman had not seen Mr. Brooks's memorandum and was not available to comment.

On Capitol Hill, Lawrence Halloran, a spokesman for Representative Christopher Shays, the Connecticut Republican who is chairman of the National Security Subcommittee of the Government Reform Committee, said Energy Department employees had been undergoing audits for years and "shouldn't require spoon feeding on how to handle this."

"It speaks of a somewhat paranoid and closed culture over there," Mr. Halloran said.

He added that audits by inspectors general, who are watchdogs in the departments they survey and generally report directly to the department secretary and relevant officials in Congress, usually end with conferences where auditors sit down with officials of the office they are studying and review preliminary findings, giving the latter a chance to point out misunderstandings.

Mr. Halloran said it was troubling that an Energy Department official would say a finding was out of context after the report had been issued.