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Los Alamos can't find two vials of plutonium

Lab thinks they were mislabeled, discarded

By Zachary Coile

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WASHINGTON — The Los Alamos National Laboratory has lost track of a small quantity of plutonium, raising new questions about the New Mexico nuclear weapons lab's handling of radioactive material.

Officials at the lab, which is managed by the University of California, said the material — two vials of plutonium oxide — was probably mislabeled by lab employees. Lab managers believe it was most likely discarded in a waste drum on site, and they have launched a search of the drums to find the missing vials.

Los Alamos officials insist the plutonium is not weapons-grade and the small amount would pose little threat to the public even if it was taken off the facility — which they say is extremely unlikely.

"This material has scientific and analytical research value, but is in a low hazard and threat category," said the lab's director, George "Pete" Nanos.

But even a small amount of plutonium oxide is highly carcinogenic and could pose a public health or safety threat if it fell into the wrong hands, said Peter Stockton, a former Department of Energy consultant and senior investigator with the Project on Government Oversight (POGO).

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a watchdog group.

"Plutonium oxide is every bit as dangerous as weapons-grade if you wanted to disperse it in a dirty bomb or just get it airborne," Stockton said, although he acknowledged there is no evidence the material was stolen.

"The real concern to us is the system," Stockton said. "We have virtually hundreds of tons of plutonium and enriched uranium in the system. This raises questions about the reliability of that system if you can't find an identifiable quantity (of plutonium)."

Los Alamos and Department of Energy sources have told POGO the amount was about 2 grams. Lab officials would not confirm the amount, saying DOE rules forbid them from disclosing the amount for security reasons.

Another problem for UC

The missing plutonium is more bad news for UC, which is battling to keep its long-held contract to manage Los Alamos, the nation's most prestigious nuclear weapons facility. Citing repeated management failures at the lab, Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham announced in April that he



George "Pete" Nanos, lab director, says the material "is in a low... threat category."

would open UC's contract to competitive bidding when it expires in September 2005.

UC's Board of Regents has not yet decided whether to compete for the contract, but newly designated President Robert Dynes said last week, "we should continue to prepare as if we will be competing."

Nanos, the lab's new director, and Everett Beckner, the National Nuclear Security Administration's deputy assistant for defense programs, were reportedly furious

when news of the missing plutonium first surfaced last week, according to several sources.

However, an Energy Department spokesman was more circumspect Wednesday, saying the agency was waiting for the results of the lab's search before making any further comments.

"We're monitoring the situation closely," said Bryan Wilkes, NNSA spokesman. "They have told us they are working diligently to resolve this discrepancy."

Discovered June 12

Los Alamos officials said the loss was revealed on June 12 during a routine transfer of nuclear materials. The two glass vials of plutonium oxide — part of an experiment on the storage of nuclear materials that was completed in February 2002 — were listed on an inventory of materials, but were not found by lab employees.

Lab officials said they suspect that an employee wrongly assumed the plutonium oxide was going to storage — and entered that information into the lab's computer database — when, in fact, the glass vials were being discarded in a waste drum.

"At this time, we have no reason to believe that any other scenario is credible," Nanos said.

The incident was reported to the Energy Department within 24 hours as required by department policy, Wilkes said.

Sample not pure

The material is plutonium 239 — the type used in nuclear weapons — but it is a low-purity sample because it has been mixed with oxygen and other inert elements, making it unsuitable for use in a nuclear bomb, said lab spokesman Kevin Roark.

Los Alamos has faced criticism in the past for its handling of radioactive material. In April, the Energy Department cited the lab for its lax oversight of procedures for handling plutonium and other nuclear material.

In one incident, on March 13, 2002, a lab worker decommissioning a "glove box" — a rectangular box fitted with protective gloves for handling radioactive material — cut through a copper line that was contaminated with plutonium. The worker's action released a small amount of radioactive material into a room in which seven workers were exposed, though none of the workers have shown any health effects.

Nanos said the missing vials of plutonium have led to a review of the lab's database to make sure all nuclear materials are being properly labeled, tracked and stored.

"The lessons learned in this instance will help us in our continuing efforts to achieve operational excellence," Nanos said.

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