

At the Weapons Labs/DOE Sites

AT LOS ALAMOS TA-55 MATERIAL UNACCOUNTED FOR

Los Alamos National Laboratory officials have been unable to account for an unspecified amount of nuclear material at a facility at its Technical Area 55 that exceeds “alarm limits,” according to internal communication between National Nuclear Security Administration and lab officials made public last week. Though lab spokesman Kevin Roark have said there is no chance the material was stolen from the laboratory and that the problem is related to an error in “internal inventory and accounting that documents movement of sensitive materials within a small portion of Technical Area 55,” the incident raises questions about LANL’s Nuclear Material Control and Accountability (MC&A) program. Lab officials reported the missing material to NNSA Jan. 27 after a routine inventory check.

Nearly four weeks later, Los Alamos Site Office Manager Donald Winchell scolded Lab Director Michael Anastasio for repeated material control issues at the lab in a Feb. 23 letter. “This issue, along with issues identified during assessments over the last year, raises questions about the ability of the Los Alamos National Laboratory MC&A

Program to accomplish its primary objective, namely to deter and detect theft and diversion of special nuclear material,” Winchell and Los Alamos Site Office Contracting Officer Robert Poole wrote in a letter to Anastasio. The letter was released Feb. 26 by the Project on Government Oversight.

Lab: Investigation Underway

Roark said an investigation is currently underway to determine the cause of the error, and though it has not concluded and the missing material has not been found, Roark maintained that no material was believed to be missing or stolen from the lab. He would reveal what the missing material is, or how much is unaccounted for, but POGO investigators say approximately 1 kilogram of plutonium is missing.

Roark said other security measures at the lab ensure that no material has left the laboratory. “We have what’s known as defense in-depth,” Roark said. “Internal inventory controls

are just one of a suite of measures. The internal inventory controls are not really there to ensure that no material leaves the building. We have a variety of other systems and technologies we use to give us that assurance.”

Winchell admitted in his letter to Anastasio that the concerns about the missing material were partially alleviated by the lab’s physical security and protective forces, but a review by an NNSA Special Review Team found serious problems with the lab’s MC&A Program in accounting, lack of planning, improper adherence to guidelines and lack of qualified and experienced personnel in critical positions.

Some of the same issues contributed significantly to the material control problems and had been identified in June of 2008 during a previous NNSA headquarters review. “While LANS took action to address many of the concerns identified in June, it is disappointing that LANS manage-

ment took little action to address these larger concerns regarding critical positions and procedures since that time and that repeated attempts to provide the necessary expertise from the [Babcock & Wilcox] corporate structure to assist in addressing these issues were largely ignored,” Winchell and Poole wrote.

Despite the MC&A issues, LANS was still awarded the entire \$1.43 million performance award fee for security, which includes an assessment of Material Control and Accountability. POGO senior investigator Peter Stockton said Winchell’s rebuke of the lab “shows that DOE is not afraid to use vigorous inspections for identifying potential security problems. Unfortunately, DOE did not use its power of the purse to get its contractor to quickly resolve the problem. A sharply worded letter is a good step, but without financial penalties, improvement is much less likely.”