



P R E S S R E L E A S E

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NEW MEXICO WATCHDOG GROUP APPALLED OVER DOE AND SAFETY BOARDS' URGENCY FOR SPEED OVER SAFETY IN RE-OPENING LOS ALAMOS

In an e-mail from Linton Brooks, Administrator of the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration, to Los Alamos National Laboratory Director Pete Nanos, Brooks writes "The [Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety] Board is concerned that Los Alamos procedures for start-up are too demanding and call for fixing all existing problems... They say that with the current procedures it could be months before Los Alamos is back in business and they see that as unacceptable." The Board is an independent agency chartered by Congress that monitors safety issues throughout the nuclear weapons complex. While it has ably identified many DOE safety issues over the years it is now apparently condoning the resumption of nuclear operations at LANL before all safety issues are resolved.

Jay Coghlan, Director of Nuclear Watch of New Mexico, commented: "Ultimately, the current stand down at LANL has to be regarded as a sham if operations are resumed at dangerous nuclear facilities before they have approved safety authorizations in place. LANL, the DOE and the Safety Board should do the right thing and assure us of verified safety rather than covering up and conducting business as usual."

Many nuclear operations at LANL are not safe and should not be allowed to resume until verified to be safe. On May 21, 2004, the Safety Board reported to Brooks that criticality experiments about to operate in "campaign mode" at the Lab could possibly vaporize plutonium. The Board said that if its long-standing concerns were not resolved it could result in nearly a 700 rem offsite dose (500 rem is considered fatal).

On May 27, 2004, the Safety Board again reported to Brooks on the Lab's status of legally required "safety bases" for operating nuclear facilities. The Board stated, "The annual update requirements for safety bases at LANL are not being enforced" and have "rarely occurred for LANL nuclear facilities." Of perhaps the greatest interest is "Plutonium Facility (TA-55) - The TA-55 safety basis is about 7 years old and has had no annual updates approved in that period." The Board further observed that the facility's worse case accident scenario involving a plutonium fire could generate an 800 rem offsite dose.

Coghlan notes: "The Rocky Flats Plant in Colorado, the former site for pit production, experienced numerous plutonium fires and finally ceased operations following a 1989 FBI raid investigating environmental crimes. It is incomprehensible that LANL's plutonium pit production facility has not had an

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approved safety basis for seven years. Furthermore, the lack of a safety basis for LANL's pit production facility is not an isolated case." In all, the Safety Board reported that 17 of LANL's 26 nuclear facilities lack renewed or complete safety authorizations.

In its appraisal of University of California performance in Fiscal Year 2003 for management of the Lab, the NNSA itself found that "During the evaluation period, LANL committed 45 violations of Technical Safety Requirements (TSRs) for its operating nuclear facilities (nearly a four fold increase over previous average violations per year)... The numerous violations indicate that LANL has not been complying with operations of its nuclear facilities... LANL's implementation of this program and activity is considered unsatisfactory."

In his July 16 announcement to Lab employees of the current stand down in operations, Nanos said "In no case will I authorize a restart until I am absolutely convinced that each organization will not risk further compromise of safety, security and the environment." Further, he stated that as a condition of employment all Lab personnel had to pledge to LANL's new motto "I will not violate LANL's safety, security or compliance requirements, nor tolerate those among who do."

To this Coghlan remarked, "Of course the real issue is not compliance with LANL's internal requirements, but rather compliance with objective federal requirements governing all US nuclear weapons facilities. But now it appears as though that objective and impartial oversight is being pushed aside by a need to resume nuclear weapons design and production at the expense of verified safety to the workers, the public and the environment."

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Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (DNSFB) letters and reports are available at <http://www.dnsfb.gov/>

A copy of Linton Brook's e-mail is available upon request.