



Tri-Valley CAREs

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

DOE Fails to Provide Technical Criteria for Safe Nuclear Storage Watchdog Groups Appalled at Current Conditions; Plutonium Stored in Paint Cans, Food Pack Cans, Slip-Lid Containers at Weapons Labs

SANTA FE, NM & LIVERMORE, CA -- On March 21, 2005, the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (DNFSB) announced in the Federal Register a proposed formal recommendation "to improve the packaging and storage conditions of [DOE's] large inventory of nuclear materials once used for weapons manufacture." The DNFSB is an independent board commissioned by Congress to oversee safety issues pertaining to the Department of Energy's (DOE's) nuclear weapons complex.

In its Federal Register notice, the Board stated: "Other than two narrowly focused standards... there is no explicit DOE-wide requirement to ensure the safe storage of nuclear materials" such as plutonium. The Board observed, "Yet sites continue to rely on container types that have been used historically, but have no technically justified safety or design basis. These container types are generally forms of packaging typically used in non-nuclear applications (e.g., paint cans, food pack cans)." Thin-walled "slip-lid cans" with loose fitting covers closed only by tape are also used, even for plutonium-238, which is 100's of times more radioactive than the more common plutonium-239. In what perhaps seems like a painfully obvious necessity the Board recommended that DOE "[i]ssue a requirement that nuclear material packaging meet technically justified criteria for safe handling and storage." Nuclear Watch New Mexico and Tri-Valley Communities Against a Radioactive Environment call on DOE to quickly do just that, given that it is long overdue. Moreover, the two groups applaud the DNFSB's action.

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Present and recent halts to operations at DOE's major plutonium facilities, in large part caused by unsafe nuclear materials storage, illustrate how serious these issues are. Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory's (LLNL's) Plutonium Facility has been idle since January 15th due to safety problems.

In this latest action, the Board found that LLNL had not fully considered the potential effects of gas generation, oxidation due to leaky seals, and damage from drops and tools in its choice of nuclear materials storage containers. The Board also found that 15% of weapons-related nuclear materials are stored in technically unjustified packaging more than five years old. Meanwhile, LLNL is pushing to increase its plutonium inventory from a storage limit of 1,540 pounds to 3,300 pounds.

DOE's other major nuclear weapons-related plutonium facilities are at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), and both LANL and LLNL are managed by the University of California. Los Alamos had serious plutonium-238 contamination incidents of multiple workers in August 2001 and August 2003, the latter due to leakage from a slip-lid can which has still not been cleaned up. In its recommendation the Board observed, "the technical adequacy of packaging - the combination of containers and other components providing a contamination barrier - for nuclear materials, including liquids, is dependent on the safety bases of individual facilities." Yet, in a separate report, the DNFSB has found that LANL's plutonium facility has not had an updated, approved safety basis since 1996. Further, an August 2004 audit by the DOE's own Inspector General found that "[t]hese materials are kept in containers that are not acceptable for long-term storage", and that the Lab's nuclear materials stabilization program had to be extended from 2002 to 2010, increasing taxpayers' costs by an additional \$78 million. Finally, the so-called stand down to all operations at LANL because of security and safety issues has cost taxpayers at least \$367 million.

Jay Coghlan, NWNM Director, commented: "The Safety Board has done the public a great service alerting us to these serious inadequacies in the storage of some of the world's most dangerous materials. It is unfathomable that the Labs could be so negligent in issues that can have such serious consequences. It's time for them to truly prioritize nuclear materials stabilization above the indefinite preservation and so-called improvement of nuclear weapons."

Marylia Kelley, Executive Director of Tri-Valley CAREs and a close neighbor of LLNL, stated: "Safety procedures at Livermore Lab's Plutonium Facility are out of compliance with regulations. Faulty gloveboxes and other equipment have been found in use at the facility. Plutonium is stored in paint cans and food pack cans. As shocking as this is, it is perhaps even more shocking to realize that these are all repeat violations and safety lapses. Worker and public safety dictate that the Livermore Lab Plutonium Facility remain shut down this time -- and not be allowed to reopen on mere promises from management of reform at a later date. Further, the Department of Energy should move to de-inventory the plutonium at the Lab, not double it."

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The DNFSB's full recommendation is available at http://www.dnfsb.gov/pub_docs/dnfsb/rec_2005.html. For further information, please call Tri-Valley CAREs at (925) 443-7148 or Nuclear Watch of New Mexico at (505) 989-7342. Or, visit their websites at www.trivalleycares.org and www.nukewatch.org.