



State of New Mexico  
*Office of the Governor*

Bill Richardson  
*Governor*

September 8, 2004

Secretary Spencer Abraham  
U.S. Department of Energy  
1000 Independence Ave. SW  
Washington, D.C. 20585

*Sen Spurr*  
Honorable Secretary Abraham:

I am writing to inform you that planned criticality experiments at Los Alamos National Laboratory's Technical Area-18 presently pose potentially severe risks to the health and safety of many New Mexicans. I believe now is an opportune time to address this issue given that the Lab has ceased all but the most essential operations in order to assure safety and security.

Briefly, in May of this year, the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (DNFSB) transmitted to the National Nuclear Security Administration two reports that "identify a number of issues that need to be addressed in the near term to ensure continued safe operations in TA-18 in advance of the relocation of the facility's mission." The Board noted that three of TA-18's critical assemblies are soon to be relocated to the Nevada Test Site. Notwithstanding, two critical assemblies experimenting with plutonium and/or highly enriched uranium will be operating for the indefinite future at TA-18 in a "campaign mode." The Board postulated that in a worst case scenario, one of those assemblies could vaporize plutonium and generate nearly a 700 rem offsite dose.

You are aware of my past interest in TA-18 issues while I was DOE Secretary. Mechanical malfunctions have repeatedly occurred during criticality experiments. The Board noted that at present, federal oversight at TA-18 has been "marginal." The lab buildings containing the critical assemblies offer no confinement in the event of an accident. The DNFSB predicted that were an accident to occur, it could have the second most severe consequences possible, exceeded only by site-wide catastrophic events such as a major earthquake or Lab-wide fire.

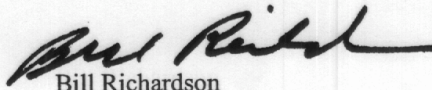
The probability of a worst case accident may be arguably low. Nevertheless, the possible consequences are simply too severe to ignore. LANL is currently suffering a loss in congressional and public confidence. I contend that it would not well serve DOE or the Lab to proceed with criticality experiments when the DNFSB has registered such serious and unresolved concerns.



I strongly request that DOE and LANL halt any planned criticality experiments at TA-18 until all safety issues are thoroughly resolved and verified as such by the Board. It is imprudent for LANL to conduct such high-risk experiments until it is certain that they have addressed all of the above-mentioned issues in a comprehensive manner. In short, DOE and the DNFSB should intervene and make operational safety as certain as it can be or cease TA-18's criticality experiments at this time.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Bill Richardson  
Governor of New Mexico

cc: Litton Brooks, NNSA Administrator  
Pete Nanos, LANL Director  
John Conway, DNFSB Chairman

BR/po