

nuclear watch new mexico

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NNSA Penalizes Sandia; In Response Labs Director Says the Needs of the Nuclear Weapons Stockpile May Not Be Met

Santa Fe, NM - Albuquerque's KRQE TV Channel 13 investigative reporter Larry Barker has found that "[a]fter calling employee safety standards "inexcusable," the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration recently withheld more than \$6 million in incentive fees from Sandia [National Laboratories] as punishment... Lab director, Dr. Paul Himmert, defended Sandia's handling of the Alaskan incident to the federal government. But, in a strongly-worded rebuke, NNSA Acting Director Neile Miller called Himmert's version of the Kodiak events "disingenuous," characterized Sandia's response to the accident as "minimal" and said she was disturbed that no disciplinary action was ever taken against the employees involved."

In last night's broadcast Mr. Barker interviewed New Mexico's senior senator Tom Udall and Nuclear Watch New Mexico's Jay Coghlan. Both called for Sandia Labs to openly acknowledge and discuss a tragic vehicle accident in Alaska that resulted in the permanent paralysis of two employees. Sandia Labs Director Paul Himmert refused Mr. Barker's repeated requests to be interviewed.

However, Mr. Barker did manage to comprehensively document NNSA's process of fee determination that resulted in the penalty. Included is a 7-page letter by Sandia Director Paul Himmert defending the Labs and arguing that Sandia should not be docked for its negligent performance. He concludes by writing

"...these actions [to penalize Sandia] are interpreted by me and my leadership as intended (whether rightly or wrongly) to send us a message that our broader national security work is not supported by the NNSA... the impact of such a message will impact our ability to support the nation's national security challenges. First and foremost among these challenges are the needs of our nation's nuclear deterrent, which we cannot meet without our broader work."

Paul Himmert wears two hats, the first as Sandia Labs Director, the second as president of the executive board of the for-profit Sandia Corporation, a wholly owned subsidiary of the world's largest defense contractor, the Lockheed Martin Corporation. Himmert's salary has not been publicly revealed, but his predecessor Tom Hunter received \$1.7 million in total annual compensation.

Sandia's budget for nuclear weapons now exceeds Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories. It is the lead lab for a Life Extension Program that will radically change the existing B61 nuclear bomb, whose estimated costs have exploded to over \$10 billion. Lockheed Martin is the lead contractor for the controversial F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, whose estimated service life cycle will cost more than one trillion dollars. The future mission of the stealthy F-35 will be in large part to deliver precision-guided B61 bombs forward deployed in Europe (against what threat?), refurbished under Sandia's leadership.

Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch New Mexico Director, commented, "In response to NNSA's criticism and proposed penalty, in effect Hommert tells the federal government to give us the money or the safety and reliability of the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile is at risk. There is an inherent conflict of interest in having the nuclear weapons labs directors also acting as presidents of the for-profit limited liability corporations that run the labs. As part of badly need reform and strengthening of federal oversight, these two positions should be strictly separated so that the American public can be fully confident that profoundly serious nuclear weapons policy decisions are not being influenced by private profit motives."

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KRQE Channel 13's investigative report by Larry Barker is available at http://www.krqe.com/dpp/news/larry_barker/sandia-lab-safety-costs-taxpaers-millions

His compilation of NNSA's fee determination and Sandia Lab Director Paul Hommert's letter is available at http://media2.krqe.com/_local/pdf/SNL%20Fee%20Determination.pdf

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