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Friday, January 5, 2007

DOE to Audit Lab Cleanup

By John Arnold

Journal Staff Writer

The Department of Energy's internal watchdog plans to investigate Los Alamos National Laboratory's environmental cleanup program, according to a memo issued by the agency's Office of Inspector General. Auditors will look into whether LANL is meeting milestones established under an environmental cleanup agreement with the state of New Mexico, the Dec. 19 memo states. An auditor with the inspector general's Los Alamos office on Thursday confirmed the pending audit but referred questions about its scope to the office's headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Lab spokesman James Rickman said Thursday that LANL "will cooperate fully with the inspector general to ensure the audit accurately reflects the laboratory's performance on this issue."

State environment officials have for months been criticizing LANL's new manager, Los Alamos National Security, for obstructing the 2005 cleanup agreement, known as a consent order. It lays out schedules and requirements for investigating and cleaning up decades worth of environmental contamination resulting from past lab operations.

LANL managers have repeatedly denied that they are trying to undermine the consent order's authority, saying it serves as their driver for complicated and costly cleanup work.

But over the past six months, the Environment Department has cited and in some cases fined the lab for five environmental violations, including the lab's failure to report groundwater chromium contamination in a timely manner and improper waste management at old landfill and demolition sites.

Environment Secretary Ron Curry said that he believes those violations had something to do with the inspector general's interest in investigating whether LANL is meeting consent order milestones.

"You can't look at the milestones without considering the violations that have occurred leading up to those milestones," Curry said by phone Thursday.

He added that he's hoping for an objective audit.

"If they're doing the audit with the purpose of objectively looking at how those milestones will be imperiled by all these violations that have occurred and (LANL's) lack of embracing the order, then I think (the audit) will be helpful," Curry said.

LANL Audit targets cleanup efforts

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By ANDY LENDERMAN | The New Mexican
January 5, 2007

The U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Inspector General plans to audit Los Alamos National Laboratory's environmental cleanup efforts, a department memo shows.

Specifically, the inquiry is to focus on goals outlined in a consent order, or legal agreement, governing cleanup. That agreement is between the lab and the state of New Mexico.

"The purpose of the audit is to determine whether Los Alamos National Laboratory and the Department of Energy are meeting the milestones established in the consent order," says a memo from Arthur Archuleta of the inspector general's office to a director at Energy Department headquarters.

State Environment Secretary Ron Curry has applied heavy pressure to the lab in the past six months to take the consent order, in his view, seriously. Lab officials stress they're working hard to fix environmental problems, some of which date to the Cold War.

Roughly \$1 billion worth of work needs to be done there, lab officials have said, to clean up 764 contaminated sites. The sites include old dumps with radioactive waste and hazardous contaminants in the aquifer.

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Lab spokesman James Rickman said lab officials are aware of the audit. "We will cooperate full with the (inspector general) to ensure that the audit accurately reflects the laboratory's performance on this issue," he said.

Curry noted he's taken action against the lab for perceived failures five times in the past six months, and he issued fines in two of those cases. "We expect that if it is a good audit, that the folks conducting it will contact this department," he said. "If they don't contact this department, then I would be somewhat suspect if this is a good, objective audit."

Curry also said lab managers have learned "in a very hard way" that the consent order is important to New Mexicans and the lab's federal managers.

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Audit planned for Los Alamos lab cleanup program, NM

LOS ALAMOS, N.M. (AP) _ The U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Inspector General plans to audit Los Alamos National Laboratory's environmental cleanup program.

The audit will focus on goals outlined in a March 2005 consent order between the lab and the state governing the cleanup, according to a DOE memo.

"The purpose of the audit is to determine whether Los Alamos National Laboratory and the Department of Energy are meeting the milestones established in the consent order," says the memo from Arthur Archuleta of the inspector general's office.

State Environment Secretary Ron Curry has said the lab has been reluctant to be subjected to state oversight of environmental cleanup efforts.

The lab "will cooperate fully with the (inspector general) to ensure that the audit accurately reflects the

laboratory's performance on this issue," James Rickman, a lab spokesman, said Thursday.

About \$1 billion worth of work needs to be done to clean up 764 contaminated sites, some dating to the Cold War, lab officials have said.

The sites include old dumps with radioactive waste and hazardous contaminants in an aquifer.

Curry said he has taken action against the lab for perceived failures five times in the past six months, and he issued fines in two of those cases.

"We expect that if it is a good audit, that the folks conducting it will contact this department," he said.

"If they don't contact this department, then I would be somewhat suspect if this is a good, objective audit," Curry said.

Information from: The Santa Fe New Mexican, www.sfnewmexican.com

BC-NM--Lab Cleanup

Head of nuclear agency leaving under pressure over security lapses, 2nd Ld-Writethru, NM

By H. JOSEF HEBERT Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) _ Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman has dismissed the chief of the country's nuclear weapons program because of security breakdowns at Los Alamos National Laboratory and other facilities.

Linton Brooks said Thursday he would leave in two to three weeks as head of the National Nuclear Security Administration, a post he held since July 2002.

Bodman said the nuclear agency under Brooks, a former ambassador and arms control negotiator, had not adequately fixed security problems. "I have decided it is time for new leadership at the NNSA," Bodman said.

Brooks told agency workers in a statement, "This is not a decision that I would have preferred ... (but) I accept the decision and you need to do likewise."

He characterized the demand for his resignation as "based on the principle of accountability that should govern all public service."

Brooks was reprimanded in June for failing to report to Bodman a security breach of computers at an agency facility in Albuquerque, N.M., that resulted in the theft of files containing Social Security numbers and other personal data for 1,500 workers.

The theft did not become generally known, nor was Bodman made aware of it, for eight months.

Last fall, security at Los Alamos, which has a history of problems, came into question anew. During a drug raid, authorities found classified nuclear-related documents at the home of a woman with top secret clearance who worked for a lab subcontractor.

That security breach was especially troubling, the department's internal watchdog said, because tens of millions of dollars had been spent to upgrade computer security at Los Alamos. The lab is part of the nuclear weapons complex that Brooks' agency oversees.

"These management and security issues can have serious implications for the security of the United States,"

Bodman in a statement announcing Brooks' departure.

While the agency's management "has done its best to address these concerns, I do not believe that progress in correcting these issues has been adequate," Bodman said.

"Therefore, and after careful consideration, I have decided that it is time for new leadership at the NNSA," he said.

Bodman said an acting head of the agency will be named soon.

Brooks has more than 40 years of experience in national security and nuclear nonproliferation issues. He led the negotiating team that worked on the START arms reduction treaty signed with Russia in 1991.

Widely respected for his knowledge of nuclear weapons and nonproliferation issues, Brooks nevertheless has been a target of some members of Congress.

When it was learned that Brooks did not inform his superiors for eight months about the computer theft of data on 1,500 employees, Rep. Joe Barton sought Brooks' immediate dismissal.

"His departure is long overdue," Barton, R-Texas, said Thursday.

With Democrats now in charge of the House and Senate, there has been talk of hearings into the administration's response to security breaches at the labs.

"It will take more than a new boss to fix the problems, which are far more systemic and pervasive in nature," said Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., a member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which is considering hearings.

Some lawmakers have criticized Brooks' pursuit of a bunker-buster bomb, a project promoted by Brooks but abandoned last year because of congressional opposition. Others have questioned whether Brooks' agency made a clear enough argument on behalf of the weapon.

At the same time, Brooks' agency has come under criticism for not making enough progress in working out an agreement with Russia for the disposal of tons of weapons-grade plutonium.

Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., said he has been concerned "about the effectiveness" of the agency for some time and that Bodman now "has sent a clear message" that operations need to be improved.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., said NNSA's current leadership has not been able to solve problems.

"The challenge for Secretary Bodman is to find someone to fill the position who can address security concerns while encouraging the highest quality science," Bingaman said.

The Washington-based Project on Government Oversight said it was pleased by the resignation request. POGO said NNSA had failed in its mission for years and that the change was "an opportunity for the National Nuclear Security Administration to finally live up to its name."

In his message to employees, Brooks bemoaned the lack of progress in solving security problems at Los Alamos, saying the agency was formed "to prevent such management problems from occurring.

"We have not yet done so in over five years," he said.

The agency is responsible for managing the nuclear weapons complex that includes the Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore nuclear weapons research labs. The agency has more than 37,000 employees, most of them contractor personnel.

Congress created the agency within the Energy Department in response to the uproar over security lapses at Los Alamos involving nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee, who was charged with 59 counts of mishandling sensitive information. He pleaded guilty in 2000 a a single count of mishandling computer files and was released; the other charges were dismissed.

Since then, there have been repeated security problems _ most of them at Los Alamos _ from misplaced and lost computer disks containing classified information to alleged misuse of credit cards, and last October's discovery of classified documents in a drug raid.

The lab plans to implement an expanded substance abuse policy that includes random drug tests of lab employees and pre-employment drug screening for lab workers and contractors.

Steve Sandoval, a spokesman for the lab, said Friday that all lab policies, including current substance abuse guidelines, have been under review since last year, before Los Alamos National Security LLC took over the lab's management in June from the University of California, which ran the lab for the DOE for decades.

Drug tests also will be conducted in response to reasonable suspicion of illegal drug use and after serious incidents or accidents. Sandoval said those provisions exist now.

Michael Anastasio, lab director, notified employees about the new policy last month "to let people know this was coming and take it seriously," Sandoval said.

Employees have until Feb. 5 to comment on the proposal. Comments then will be reviewed and addressed if necessary, and the new policy will go into effect after that, Sandoval said. He could not say how long that would be.

On the Net:

Energy Department: <http://www.doe.gov/>

National Nuclear Security Administration: <http://www.nnsa.doe.gov/>

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