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Friday, October 19, 2007

Shortfall May Slow Cleanup

By [Raam Wong](#)
Journal Staff Writer

Proposed budget cuts at Los Alamos National Laboratory are raising the specter of a lab unable to meet its goals in 2008 for cleaning up decades' worth of environmental contamination.

A top lab official spoke about the challenges last week during a conference on Amelia Island, Fla., according to the trade publication Weapons Complex Monitor.

Sue Stiger is quoted as saying that the lab needs \$80 million more in 2008 than the \$140 million that funded cleanup activities in 2007 or it may not be able to meet its regulatory demands.

"To stay in full compliance, we need the \$80 million ... so that certain milestones stay on schedule in the out-years," said Stiger, the lab's associate director for environmental programs, according to the publication.

Spokesmen with the lab and the

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National Nuclear Security Agency's site office in Los Alamos said it was too early to speculate on what the final 2008 budget might be.

A substantial budget shortfall would likely make it difficult, if not impossible, for the lab to meet its cleanup goals, which are required under a 2005 agreement, or consent order, with the New Mexico Environment Department.

The agreement requires the lab to evaluate and clean up decades' worth of waste by 2015.

Environment Secretary Ron Curry said in a statement Thursday that the agency would ensure that the lab's manager, Los Alamos National Security, carries out the order's provisions.

"We expect LANS to fulfill its commitment to the people of northern New Mexico in eradicating the legacy of contamination at the lab," Curry said. Earlier this year, Curry accused the lab of trying to obstruct the cleanup agreement and the agency has repeatedly fined the lab for violations of the order.

Lab director Michael Anastasio said in August that in its first year of management of the lab, LANS met 103 out of 104 of the agreement's milestones on time.

But the lab's success in meeting its goals in the future appears to be in question as Congress debates LANL's budget for the 2008 fiscal year, which began Oct. 1. Congress has passed a stop-gap measure to fund the federal government until a final spending bill is passed.

The House of Representatives wants to keep cleanup funding about the same as this year, according to the Weapons Complex Monitor, while substantially cutting the lab's budget overall.

In the Senate, a committee has endorsed

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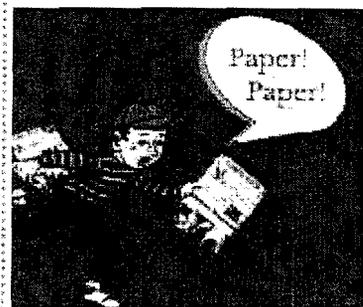
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a spending measure that includes \$222 million for cleanup, \$82.5 million above President Bush's request. The two spending measures must still be reconciled.

Stiger, who was appointed to her post in April, made her remarks during a presentation at the Weapons Complex Monitor Decisionmakers' Forum, an annual powwow of federal officials charged with overseeing and cleaning up the Department of Energy's nuclear facilities.

Journal staff writer John Fleck contributed to this report.

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