

Questions Raised about NM Lab's Safety Program

the Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — A pair of memos from an official with the National Nuclear Security Administration has raised questions about safety procedures at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

The memos state that the northern New Mexico lab has repeatedly missed deadlines to fix nuclear safety problems but that there are no immediate nuclear dangers at the lab, the Albuquerque Journal reported (<http://bit.ly/t4AuSr>).

The memos were sent to the lab in September by C.H. Keilers Jr., the top nuclear safety official with NNSA's Los Alamos Site Office. They address a number of systems intended to reduce risk, including procedures aimed at preventing inadvertent nuclear chain reactions.

The problems affect the lab's main plutonium complex, where nuclear weapons parts are made, and a group of facilities that handles nuclear waste.

While the problems outlined in the memos have lingered for years, Keilers suggested the basic issue was complacency and overconfidence on the part of workers.

The lab is taking steps to fix the problems, said Charlie Anderson, the lab's associate director for nuclear and high hazard operations.

Los Alamos is the nation's primary center for work with plutonium. Much of the work, including the manufacture of some nuclear weapons parts, is done in the lab's Technical Area 55 Plutonium Facility, a large concrete bunker known as PF-4.

The work with plutonium is done in boxes with sealed portholes, where heavy gloves allow researchers and technicians to work with the radioactive metal without being directly exposed.

One of the letters said recent problems at the facility "have called into question the effectiveness of the conduct of operations and criticality safety programs."

Questions were also raised about the adequacy of the fire protection system at a facility that packages radioactive waste for off-site shipment, inadequate lightning protection in large tent-like structures where radioactive waste is stored and whether the power supply systems in one of the lab's nuclear facilities can withstand an earthquake.

These were among "an inordinately large" number of problems identified in the lab's major nuclear waste handling facilities, according to the NNSA memos.

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The most serious criticism was aimed at criticality safety programs. Criticality happens when too much of particular types of nuclear material, including plutonium, are brought together in a small space. When that happens, a nuclear chain reaction can result, releasing a dangerous burst of radiation. The primary danger is exposing the scientists and technicians in the room to radiation.

The memos cite 23 "criticality infractions" last year in the PF-4 bunker, and the trend continued this year.

Anderson said the problems cited by the NNSA involve efforts to improve the lab's existing criticality safety program.

Anderson also noted that many of the problems cited in the memos were identified and reported by the lab itself, including the 23 infractions of criticality rules during 2010. He said such self-analysis is important, and if the lab were not finding problems itself and working to improve, he would be worried.

"The mature, well-run program is constantly self-assessing," Anderson said.

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