

Inoperable Nuke Lab System to Cost \$41 Million

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — The estimate for fixing a new but inoperable \$213 million security system at the nation's nuclear bomb lab has doubled, officials with Los Alamos National Laboratory confirmed Friday.

Lab director Charles McMillan sent employees a memo this week saying it will cost an additional \$41 million and take six months to fix the system, which has been under construction for seven years and was supposed to be complete this summer.

That is double what officials estimated a few weeks ago, when problems with the security system were first reported.

McMillan called performance on the project "unacceptable" and said it has damaged the lab's credibility.

The revised estimates follow a review of the project by officials at the lab and the National Nuclear Security Administration, the federal agency that oversees Los Alamos.

McMillan appointed a new team to oversee completion of the project, but said it remains in "suspended status" until officials figure out where to get money for the additional work.

The modern system was designed to protect what is known as Technical Area 55, the only place in the country where nuclear weapon triggers can be made. The area is one of the most sensitive at Los Alamos and includes a cement, bunker-like complex that houses two aging labs where most of the work with dangerous plutonium is done. Work to upgrade those facilities and make sure they are structurally able to withstand a major earthquake has also been plagued by problems. The complex sits atop major fault lines.

Earlier this year, a federal oversight panel issued a report saying officials significantly underestimated how much radiation could leak from the nation's premier plutonium lab after a major earthquake and fire.

Also this year, Congress put on hold for five years plans to build a new Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Nuclear Facility, whose cost estimates have ballooned from \$500 million to nearly \$6 billion over the past decade.

McMillan said completion of the advanced security system is a top priority. But he emphasized that the lab's plutonium operations remain secure.

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