

Los Alamos Study Group

Nuclear Disarmament • Environmental Protection • Social and Economic Justice

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Security Is Inadequate at Los Alamos and Other U.S. Nuclear Weapons Sites, Some Experts Say

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WASHINGTON, DC – An eight-month-long study by the Project on Government Oversight (POGO), involving several former and current security experts at the Department of Energy (DOE) and its security contractors as well as POGO staff members, has concluded that security at DOE sites is not adequate to stop determined terrorists from stealing nuclear material or causing a catastrophic nuclear or conventional explosion involving radioactive material. In more than half the mock “attacks” – the exact fraction is classified – guards at the sites have failed to protect the site and its nuclear material.

In exercises at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), “attackers” made off with fissile material in a Home Depot garden cart after “killing” the guards. The same facility (Technical Area [TA-] 18) failed a mock attack two years later, when “terrorists” had enough time to set off an improvised nuclear device.

While the probability of a terrorist attack at a nuclear site like Los Alamos is probably low in comparison with other much more vulnerable targets, the documents POGO obtained suggest that security drills here and at other sites are not conducted under realistic conditions, and that security evaluations have been systematically “upgraded” by reviewers to reflect more politically-acceptable outcomes. In some cases, insiders who have tried to speak out against “doctoring” reports and drills have been silenced. More findings follow on page three.

To solve these problems, POGO’s recommendations include:

- closing unneeded facilities;
- consolidating nuclear materials, e.g. to the Kirtland Underground Munitions Storage Complex (KUMSC) in Albuquerque or the Device Assembly Facility (DAF) at the Nevada Test Site (NTS);
- improving the budget, training, weaponry, and tactics of security forces, and exploring the possibility of
- federalizing or militarizing these guards;
- moving management and oversight of security out of the DOE and the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA); and
- converting to “media-less” computing to better safeguard data and programs from insiders.

The potential vulnerabilities at LANL are by no means limited to those mentioned in the POGO report.

LANL and DOE managers have long recognized that the 43-square-mile LANL site, currently accessible by numerous public roads, is difficult to defend against attack. The topography of the LANL

site also provides, in many cases, access and cover for any would-be attackers.

As shown in the LANL "Comprehensive Site Plan 2000" (www.lanl.gov/csp2000), there has been a plan on the books to provide several new guard stations at new perimeter entry points, using these stations to close most LANL property to public access.

"It's probably a good time to implement those ideas," said Study Group director Greg Mello. "While LANL is likely not to be a terrorist target at this time, the need for improvements like these has been long recognized, as reflected in the site plan."

While it is not a good idea to provide details about site vulnerabilities in a press release, even casual visitors to LANL can and have observed some conditions of concern. Several areas of LANL have essentially no buffer or security zone.

Lax attitudes at LANL have created – and unless changed, will create – problems.

In late August of this year, DOE safety officers wrote a strong memorandum to two LANL division directors, noting that LANL had in effect created, without permission from (or even notification to) the DOE Secretary, a new nuclear facility at Los Alamos. This building – basically a light steel shed used to store nuclear waste – contained up to 20 kilograms of fissile material, enough to make several nuclear weapons (*see* "LANL shuts down amid terrorist acts on East Coast," *The New Mexican*, 9/12/01).

This plutonium was within about 200 feet of the Cerro Grande fire. While the material was not in direct danger, due to the lack of vegetation in the immediate area, its presence at this location was contrary to repeated LANL public pronouncements at the time. DOE safety officials apparently either did not know the material was there, or understand just how much plutonium was at risk.

The two main problems highlighted in this particular incident are the apparently cavalier manner in which LANL staff circumvented key nuclear material accountability and safety rules, and the manner in which the news media and public were misled by laboratory statements. The POGO report amply documents the difficulty that DOE security auditors have had in reforming practices at LANL, among other sites.

The events of September 11 raise more fundamental questions than are addressed in the POGO report.

One cannot tighten security surrounding intrinsically-dangerous technologies indefinitely in a democratic society. At some point, long before all the terrorist scenarios are addressed, basic worker rights, community understanding, and democratic control of dangerous technologies are likely to be lost.

To fully protect against incoming aircraft, for example, it might be necessary to install anti-aircraft weapons at plutonium facilities. Such installations would be a hazard to novice or forgetful pilots, in effect transferring risk from the facility in question to the general public in yet another way, a way which most people would probably find unacceptable. This is true for many technical "solutions" to these issues.

At LANL and other DOE facilities, managers attempt to maximize the breadth of research, and funding for that research, in areas such as plutonium metallurgy, advanced nuclear fuel cycles, etc. In the wake of September 11, it is time for our society to re-evaluate such strategies. "The net social, fiscal, environmental, and security costs of nuclear facilities need to be fundamentally re-examined," Mello suggested. "It is ironic but true that the facilities which were supposed to provide us with an ultimate form of security instead seem to provide us with more vulnerability. In the final analysis, we can't promote our own weapons of mass destruction, in this case nuclear weapons, without experiencing their deleterious effects in our own society, on our own security, and on our environment."

**Highlights of the POGO report on DOE weapons facility security:
“U.S. Nuclear Weapons Complex: Security at Risk,” October 2001**
(page numbers and appendices refer to the report)

- TA-18 at LANL has twice suffered “break-ins” by mock terrorist forces who either stole material for making weapons, or detonated an improvised nuclear device which could have inflicted severe damage in New Mexico as well as in other downwind states. Attempts by the Secretary of Energy to close down TA-18 were repeatedly frustrated by LANL management (pp. 16-17).
- While security upgrades were made to LANL’s TA-18 in 2000, they have never been performance-tested (p. 17).
- In 1999, an on-site review by a contractor revealed that the LANL protective force faced major problems in defending the TA-55 plutonium facility against worst-case scenarios (Appendix W).
- Around the U.S. nuclear complex, site security forces fail in tactics, weaponry, and numbers – a combination that results in failure in more than 50% of the force-on-force tests (p. 26).
- Criteria for evaluating the security of DOE weapons facilities are not constant or objective. According to DOE’s Albuquerque Office (AL), the rating process is “subjective” and “fluid.” In fact, AL security reports often lack set security criteria until completion (Appendix U).
- Approximately 30% of the LANL Security Operations Division who were interviewed for self-assessment reports felt that they had been pressured to change or “mitigate” their security self-assessments (Appendix U).
- DOE carefully constricts the contingencies allowed in each live security test. This results in a practice that artificially inflates the effectiveness of the facility security forces (p. 10).
- Security tests at DOE facilities do not include scenarios that involve chemical and biological weapons. At a recent test, an adversary force used simulated irritant gas: the protective force had no gas masks (p. 19).
- Theft of classified information remains a major threat. It is still virtually impossible to stop an insider from moving classified information out of high-security areas. Despite these criticisms, the University of California has not given adequate priority to security concerns in relation to convenience for scientists at its New Mexico and California labs (p. 22 & Appendix D).
- The lack of active congressional oversight means that DOE reports will not reveal the true status of security at the DOE weapons facilities (p. 34).
- While budgets rise for congressionally-popular DOE projects like stockpile “stewardship” and weapons research, operational security costs at weapons facilities lack adequate funding (p. 38).

****ENDS****

Report claims security at LANL is porous

By WENDY WALSH
The New Mexican

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In October 2000, mock terrorists at Los Alamos National Laboratories stole nuclear materials that would have endangered significant parts of New Mexico and Colorado if they had been detonated.

Three years earlier, a U.S. special-forces team used a Home Depot garden cart to haul from the lab enough weapons-grade uranium for several nuclear weapons.

An independent report, "U.S.

Nuclear Weapons Complex: Security at Risk," released Tuesday, highlights these two failed security drills at Los Alamos, calling them examples of vulnerabilities at Department of Energy nuclear-weapons sites.

In security exercises throughout the United States, DOE security forces have failed to protect facilities against mock terrorists more than 50 percent of the time, the report states.

The report includes information from more than 12 DOE whistle-blowers, according to The Project on Government Oversight, a politically independent, nonprofit watchdog

organization based in Washington, D.C.

The report quotes "Science at its Best, Security at its Worst," a similarly critical 1999 report written by former U.S. Sen. Warren Rudman, and lists Peter Stockton, special assistant to former DOE Secretary Bill Richardson from 1999 to 2001, as a paid consultant.

A number of groups, however, including the DOE's Office of Independent Oversight, have said exercise artificialities make security

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forces appear to be far more capable than they actually are, the report states.

In a May 2000 DOE Inspector General report cited by the group, about 30 percent of LANL security personnel said they were pressured by supervisors to change or "mitigate" security self-assessments.

Also, when the Los Alamos security surveys reached DOE oversight personnel in Albuquerque, oversight personnel changed some of the ratings in 1998 and 1999 without providing a documented reason, the inspector general's report states.

Tuesday's report criticizes the security at Los Alamos' Technical Area 18, where scientists conduct nuclear experiments and several small nuclear reactors and tons of uranium and plutonium are housed. The site, at the bottom of a canyon, is also next to a public highway.

In 1999, a DOE security team recommended that LANL move TA-18 because of its vulnerability to terrorist attacks, and in April 2000, Richardson ordered TA-18 shut down, the report states.

However, LANL officials did not think security vulnerabilities were serious enough to shut down the facility, and Richardson ordered a study on the subject instead, Roark said.

Deliberations are continuing, Roark said.

In November 2000, former National Nuclear Security Administration Director John Gordon sent a letter to LANL Director John Browne threatening to shut down TA-18 after mock forces gained access to nuclear-reactor fuel during a security exercise, the report states.

Officials have considered moving TA-18 for years, but the site continues to operate as usual, according to Kevin Roark, LANL spokesman.

LANL officials are confident security is more than adequate at the site, Roark said. "The protective forces are well trained, well equipped and highly capable of defending Technical Area 18," Roark said.

Roark said he read the report and found it "highly inflammatory."

LANL security experienced problems during some training exercises, but the officers are not expected to do a perfect job every time, Roark said.

"They are opportunities for learning," Roark said of the exercises.

In the past three years, LANL officials said they have improved security immensely and LANL security forces' record of protecting against mock attacks is "much, much better" than 50 percent, Roark said.

Roark said he could not disclose the actual percentage, saying it was classified information.

"Of course, some classification

is legitimate, but a good deal of information is classified because it is embarrassing," the report states.

Cyber-security has also improved after a computer hard drive was lost at the lab in the summer of 2000, Roark said.

"There's a security help desk, and it used to be the place people called if they couldn't get their computer to boot up. Now they call and ask, 'Should I send this e-mail?'" Roark said. "There's a lot more awareness."

The report recommends the nation's nuclear materials, spread out at 10 sites, be consolidated at Kirtland Air Force Base and the Device Assembly Facility at the Nevada Test Site.

The report also recommends that the DOE increase the amount of money spent on security.

Bureaucratic back-patting and an inability to listen to criticism are the causes of security problems, the report states.

"The DOE bureaucracy portrays facilities as being secure and impervious to terrorists and spies when, in fact, they are not," the report states.

Greg Mello, director of the Los Alamos Study Group, said the report's significance depends on how much citizens want to defend the nation's nuclear materials.

"The lab is supposed to make us feel secure, not more vulnerable," Mello said.