

Los Alamos National Lab Cited For Nuclear Safety Violations

For Immediate Release

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WASHINGTON, DC The U.S. Department of Energy has cited the Department of Energy's Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) in Los Alamos, New Mexico for continuing failures to conduct its work according to the laboratory's established nuclear safety procedures. The problems in this case caused a worker to receive an unplanned and uncontrolled radiological exposure and intake of radiological material.

The incident took place in November 1998 as a LANL employee was working in the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Facility (CMR) to dispose of legacy items that included chemical and radioactive materials. The worker opened two cans that had not been appropriately marked to indicate they contained radioactive material. Once it was clear that the cans contained unexpected materials, work was not stopped but continued without adequate radiological monitoring and work controls. The worker subsequently became externally radioactively contaminated and acquired an internal dose and an extremity dose to his hand. While the exposures were well under regulatory limits, they could have been avoided entirely and, in different circumstances, could have been much higher.

In a subsequent event at the same facility in June 1999, a glovebox was overpressurized, leading to a glove rupture and extensive radioactive contamination throughout the room. Because no workers were in the room at the time, there were no radiological exposures.

"We are most concerned that these problems continue to repeat themselves and that laboratory management -- despite commitments made in previous enforcement actions -- has failed to correct identified problems," said David Michaels, Assistant Secretary for Environment Safety and Health. "These same problems led LANL management to halt all normal operations in the CMR for several months last year so they could develop proper work controls and worker understanding of the importance of these controls to their safety. Clearly these goals have not been fully attained."

The severity of the violations in this action would have led to a civil penalty of \$220,000, with no mitigation granted for self-reporting and effective corrective actions. However, because LANL is one of the DOE laboratories exempt from civil penalties by statute, the penalty will not be imposed.

The Preliminary Notice of Violation (PNOV) cited problems in four areas: work process; inadequate instrumentation and monitoring for radiation; inadequate radiological postings and

access control for radiological areas; and inadequate actions to prevent recurrence of problems. The severity level for each of the four sets of problems was categorized as Level II on a scale of Level I, the most significant, to Level III, the least significant.

This action follows a September 1998 Notice of Violation that cited Los Alamos for "numerous failures to implement established radiological protection requirements and quality controls to protect workers and the public" at the CMR facility.

While no civil penalty can be assessed, issuance of the PNOV will require the laboratory to identify appropriate and effective corrective actions and expected completion dates. "We will be taking a hard look at the adequacy of the corrective action plan and its implementation," said Rick Glass, manager of the department's Albuquerque Operations Office. "We are assigning a high priority to address the cited deficiencies and expect the contractor to do the same." DOE will then determine whether further enforcement action is required. The notice will become final in 30 days unless the contractor provides sufficient justification and information to rebut the findings of the enforcement action. LANL is operated for the DOE by the University of California.

Copies of the Preliminary Notices of Violation which provide detailed information on each action are available via the Internet at: <http://tis.eh.doe.gov/enforce> .

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