

January 24, 2001

NNSA Cites Los Alamos National Laboratory For Nuclear Safety Violations

The Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) has cited the University of California for violations of nuclear safety rules at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) in New Mexico. The University of California operates LANL for the NNSA.

The violations are described in a Preliminary Notice of Violation (PNOV), which was issued on January 19, 2001. The violations stem from several events, including a March 2000 operational event at one facility in which eight workers were exposed to airborne plutonium during a leak from a glovebox auxiliary system. The PNOV also cites several events at a second facility in which nuclear facilities were operated outside of the limits and controls set by facility safety documents.

The PNOV was issued by John Gordon, Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration, upon the recommendation of the Department of Energy Assistant Secretary for Environment, Safety and Health. "Our goal is to avoid such incidents by being proactive and making safety an integral part of every operation," said Gordon.

The March 2000 plutonium release occurred during the performance of corrective maintenance on a glovebox, a sealed system under negative pressure, which allows manipulation of objects inside the box via gloves integrated into the sides of the box. The plutonium was released via a leak from a loose fitting in an auxiliary gas system. Subsequent investigation identified a number of deficiencies associated with the work, including a lack of formal direction and authorization, and failure to comply with established procedures.

No immediate adverse health consequences resulted from the exposure, and involved workers were placed on temporary work restrictions to limit additional exposure until dose estimates could be determined. Up to three workers may have received exposures that exceeded the annual regulatory limit set for this work; one worker's exposure has been estimated at over five times the annual limit.

The PNOV also addressed several events occurring after March 2000 in which similar concerns relating to procedural adequacy and implementation were identified. None of these later events resulted in worker contamination.

The second facility is where Los Alamos workers perform experiments in nuclear criticality. The investigation determined that there were problems with work controls, and with operating within the parameters that LANL had established. While no actual adverse consequences occurred because of these deficiencies, they were collectively significant because they represented an unacceptable trend in the operation and maintenance of nuclear facilities.

LANL is exempt from civil penalty by statute and no civil penalty is being assessed in association with the current PNOV. If not exempt, a civil penalty of \$605,000 would have been assessed, based on the significance of the events. This penalty amount reflects partial mitigation for corrective actions taken and self-identification of one issue.

The PNOV will become final on February 19, 2001, 30 days after transmittal, unless the University of California provides sufficient justification and information to rebut the findings of the enforcement action.

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