

The Secretary of Energy
Washington, DC 20585

July 14, 1997

The Honorable John T. Conway
Chairman
Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board
625 Indiana Avenue, N.W., Suite 700
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This letter acknowledges receipt of Recommendation 97-2 issued on May 19, 1997, addressing the need for improved criticality safety practices and programs to alleviate potential adverse impacts on safety and productivity of Department of Energy operations. The Department accepts Recommendation 97-2 to assure the continuation of criticality safety at defense nuclear facilities.

To acquire a common understanding of issues raised in Recommendation 97-2, we surveyed criticality safety professionals at our major sites. The survey identified the following three general understandings which will be the foundation for the Implementation Plan.

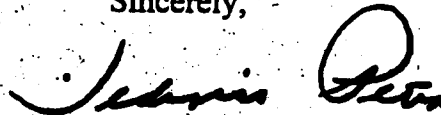
- The Department has not efficiently integrated criticality safety as part of work planning and implementation uniformly across the complex.
- We are aware of emerging criticality safety issues as the Department transitions from nuclear weapons production to materials stabilization; facilities deactivation, decontamination and decommissioning; and packaging, transportation and dispositioning of fissile materials.
- The Department needs to develop new guidance and technical support resources to address criticality safety issues.

The Department recognized the need to integrate safety into its work. Initiatives are being implemented, as appropriate, to apply graded or tailored approaches to the work and any associated hazards. We are focussing on improved work performance and feedback as part of an overall Integrated Safety Management program.

The Department is aware of the challenges posed by the need to stabilize nuclear materials, deactivate contaminated facilities, and provide secure and safe storage of fissile materials. Therefore, our response to Recommendation 97-2 will be tailored to address criticality safety concerns where they exist. In conjunction with key line managers, the Department will form a group of criticality safety experts from the Department of Energy and contractor communities to provide advice and assistance in development of a Recommendation 97-2 Implementation Plan. To ensure efficient operations of this criticality safety program and to build upon the successes of activities under way, we plan to integrate continuing actions under the 93-2 Implementation Plan into the 97-2 Implementation Plan, and propose closure of Recommendation 93-2.

Dr. Robin Staffin, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Research and Development, Office of Defense Programs, and Mr. David Huizenga, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Nuclear Materials and Facilities Stabilization, Office of Environmental Management, are the responsible co-managers for preparing the Implementation Plan. Dr. Staffin will serve as the principal point of contact with the Board and will work with you and your staff to develop an acceptable Implementation Plan meeting our mutual expectations.

Sincerely,



Federico Peña