

July 7, 2000

The Honorable Bill Richardson
Secretary of Energy
1000 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20585-0104

Dear Secretary Richardson:

The Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (Board) is concerned that budget considerations may preclude the Department of Energy (DOE) from meeting its commitments in the Implementation Plan for the Board's Recommendation 99-1, *Safe Storage of Plutonium Pits at the Pantex Plant*. The most significant commitment at risk is the schedule for removal of plutonium pits from a corrosive environment and their repackaging in a new sealed container that affords much safer storage.

In its implementation plan DOE committed to establishing and maintaining a two-line, two-shift pit repackaging effort, with a goal of repackaging 200 pits per month. Unfortunately, a fiscal year (FY) 2000 budget shortfall for container procurement will likely result in reducing the effort to a two-line, one-shift operation with a repackaging rate of only 100 pits per month. Also, budget projections for FY 2001 and FY 2002 currently indicate only enough funding to support this downgraded 100 pits per month operation. If the effort to repackage plutonium pits is not fully funded, some pits may remain in an unsuitable storage environment for up to 10 more years.

Given the gravity of the potential compromise to safety, as well as reliability issues associated with storing pits in an unsuitable environment, DOE should not underfund this effort.

Sincerely,

John T. Conway
Chairman

c: Brigadier General Thomas F. Gioconda
Mr. Mark B. Whitaker, Jr.