

DEFENSE NUCLEAR FACILITIES SAFETY BOARD

November 18, 2005

MEMORANDUM FOR: J. Kent Fortenberry, Technical Director

FROM: C. H. Keilers, Jr.

SUBJECT: Los Alamos Report for Week Ending November 18, 2005

Emergency Exercise: LANL responded to hazardous material found off-site Wednesday morning and then conducted its annual emergency exercise Wednesday afternoon, including activating the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The scenario involved a simulated accident between a vehicle and an acid-loaded tanker with accompanying injuries and a toxic plume release over the town-site.

Based on activities the site rep observed, emergency response showed marked improvement compared to training drills conducted earlier this year and a no-notice exercise conducted last December (site rep weeklies 9/16/05, 12/3/04). Coordination in the EOC between NNSA, LANL, and Los Alamos County was close and commendable; this is an essential element for LANL emergency response due to the proximity of LANL facilities to the public. Considering nuclear facilities, while the probability of a major accident and off-site release is low, further pre-planning appears needed to ensure timely and effective community protective actions, including resources to implement those protective actions.

Fire Protection: On Nov 8th, LASO forwarded to NNSA headquarters (NA-10) the LANL integrated plan to address fire protection issues in the Board's letter of May 31st (site rep weekly 10/21/05). LASO expressed concerns with (a) the pace of implementing improvements until the new LANL contract is in place, (b) LANL fire protection staffing and progress on fire hazard analyses, (c) LANL use of the exemption request process, (d) lapse in forest thinning funding, and (e) the incompletely understood path-forward to finish site-wide fire alarm system upgrades.

Of particular concern are delays in completing the scope of the partial site-wide fire alarm system upgrades in LANL plutonium facilities (TA-55, CMR); the delays have been attributed to lag-time for accompanying safety basis changes. These upgrades are intended to correct long-standing problems in alarm signal transmission (site rep weeklies 1/17/03, 9/28/01), and they become even more important as LANL transfers fire department dispatch to the newly established EOC joint dispatch center.

NNSA Site Office (LASO) Oversight: The LASO 3-month stand-down to prepare for contract transition starts Monday (11/21); NNSA's contract announcement is expected the following week (12/1), which will start the 6-month contract transition. During the first half of contraction transition (Dec 2005 - Feb 2006), federal oversight at LANL will be cut to one-third of current levels and consist of a 31-person continuity team, including 4 facility reps and 3 subject matter experts, supplemented in some manner by the NNSA Service Center. LANL will also step up operational oversight by 8 to 10 people during this period. The LASO Manager will meet daily with his principal staff to assess emergent needs and shift personnel as deemed necessary (site rep weeklies 11/11/05, 10/28/05).

The scale and timing for the stand-down is unfortunate since it coincides with the first 3 months of contract transition; the federal role during this period will be pivotal to (a) setting expectations for the new contractor management team and (b) ensuring the LANL workforce, understandably anxious about the future, stays focused on continued safe operation. The daily LASO Manager meeting appears to be the key risk mitigation since the composition of the LASO continuity team was established ad hoc. At this time, the deliverables, the specs for deliverables, and the opportunities to accelerate LASO preparation for transition are incompletely defined. LASO also appears to need substantial external assistance to efficiently achieve the key objective of the stand-down – develop sound processes for managing the new contract – since the new contract will be radically different from the old one (e.g., fee determination) and is outside the experience of many LASO personnel.