

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL ARCHIVES

[Back to Search Results Page](#)

LANL Owes An Explanation

December 2, 2001

Section: Opinion

Page: 4

EDITORIAL

The disclosure over the week of Thanksgiving that samples of anthrax labeled "virulent" had been shipped to the Los Alamos National Laboratory is troublesome.

Fortunately, there doesn't seem to be evidence that anyone's health was endangered by the shipping glitch, and lab officials say the package was sterilized as part of routine procedures for handling even nonvirulent samples.

At a time when the National Nuclear Security Administration is pushing to establish facilities in Los Alamos that are supposed to receive live, virulent strains of dangerous organisms like anthrax, the incident deserves attention and more **explanation**.

The lab for years has been handling nonliving or nonvirulent samples or "extracted DNA" portions of anthrax and other deadly organisms. And LANL has developed a huge repository of information about anthrax genetics. Just how important that work can be has become suddenly apparent in recent weeks, as LANL now is involved in the investigation of the anthrax contaminations that hit after Sept. 11.

But long before anthrax spores began turning up in the mail on the East Coast, the NNSA proposed a biosafety level 3, or BSL-3, laboratory at Los Alamos. A BSL-3 facility would allow scientists to study live infectious agents, to better prepare for defense against biological weapons.

The proposal has stirred up opposition from some lab watchdogs. The lab and the security agency have said the BSL-3 facility will be safe and that there's absolutely no intention to develop American biological weapons. They've also said that all materials transported to and from the facility would follow Department of Transportation and Centers for Disease Control regulations.

But a couple of aspects of the lab receipt of package labeled as "virulent" anthrax Oct. 26 are cause for concern:

* The public has been told all along that the BSL-3 lab is needed because LANL can't currently handle live samples of anthrax, plague and other deadly agents. After the Oct. 26 incident came to light, we've been told that lab actually can handle even virulent anthrax safely but chooses not to. We've also been told that when public health and safety concerns are an issue, the CDC can exempt institutions receiving virulent samples from having to register with the CDC.

These disclosures have blurred what once seemed clear distinctions between what LANL can or can't do absent a BSL-3 facility.

If the Los Alamos lab can now or in the future handle live bugs even without the BSL-3 facility, the public needs to know.

* The fact that a Northern Arizona University researcher sent the "virulent" package to LANL raises questions about how well the various rules about where and how live hazardous organisms can be shipped are known or enforced.

LANL says it's reviewing procedures to prevent receiving similar shipments in the future although lab officials didn't disclose the Oct. 26 incident at a public meeting on the proposed BSL-3 facility three weeks after the incident.

The shipping glitch came to light after a government watchdog group found out about it and blitzed e-mails to media organizations around the country.

Granted, LANL, Northern Arizona and others involved in the anthrax probe are in the middle of an emergency situation and a major criminal situation it's not a normal research project, with normal timelines or pressures.

But the shipping glitch should at least be good reason for care, caution and careful review as the BSL-3 proposal goes forward.

All content copyright © 1999 Albuquerque Journal and may not be republished without permission.

Send comments or questions to newslibrary@newsbank.com
