

Do our nuclear labs lack security? Many sites fail mock invasion tests

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By Lisa Friedman

WASHINGTON -- The federal Department of Energy's nuclear facilities are frighteningly vulnerable to attack, failing mock security tests more than half the time and leaving metropolitan regions like the Bay Area and Denver vulnerable to a nuclear detonation that "would dwarf the impacts of Chernobyl," a government watchdog group has found.

The report on an eight-month investigation by the **Project for Government Oversight** has not yet been released publicly, organization members said, because of the "tremendous sensitivity" surrounding national security weaknesses in the wake of last month's terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center.

But members of Congress and administration officials familiar with the report said its implications, particularly in light of Sept. 11, are serious. And one of the changes the report suggests is the merger of Livermore and Los Alamos national labs, presumably at the remote New Mexico site rather than in populous California.

"We cannot allow security weaknesses to exist," said Rep. Chris Shays, R-Conn., chairman of the House Government Reform subcommittee on national security.

Shays, who said he was "deeply troubled" by the report, plans to launch his own review of DOE security at nuclear facilities based on the group's investigation.

"Unfortunately," Shays said, "DOE has a history of acknowledging security risks, taking corrective action and then after a while lapsing back to old bad habits."

The Project for Government Oversight began in 1981 as the Project on Military Procurement. The Washington, D.C.-based group started out exposing \$7,600 coffee makers and \$436 hammers at the Pentagon. In recent years, the group has reported on waste and abuse in every facet of the federal government and is best known for protecting whistle-blowers.

The group's past work has been hailed by some in Congress -- such as Reps. Steve Horn, R-Long Beach, and George Miller, D-Martinez; and former Energy Secretary Bill Richardson -- and blasted by western Republicans who accused the project of paying whistle-blowers.

According to the group's investigation, the government fails its own mock training exercises aimed at stopping thefts and terrorist attacks more than 50 percent of the time. The exact figure, investigators said, is classified.

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In one of the more damning illustrations of security breaches, Navy SEALs were able to make a big enough hole in a chain-link fence surrounding a Rocky Flats nuclear production facility in Colorado that they were able to "steal" enough plutonium for several bombs.

In another, Army commandos walked out of the University of California-managed Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico with a Home Depot garden cart filled with nuclear material.

"In congressional testimony, DOE has led the public to believe that its security at these sites is a well-oiled machine, and there is nothing to worry about," the report reads. "After all, they argue, the government has been building bombs at these sites for more than 60 years and no one has attacked them yet.

"Given the recent tragedies in New York and Washington, D.C., this argument falls flat. In fact, they are one-eyed toothless watchdogs," investigators wrote.

The report chalks up security breaches to a myriad of problems, including "conflict of interest, protection of the contractor, embarrassment, protection of the program, political sensitivities and bureaucratic survival."

A spokeswoman for the National Nuclear Security Administration, which was created as part of the DOE to oversee security last year, said no one in the agency had seen the report and declined to comment.

The investigation also assails the DOE for storing nuclear materials in sites across the country, many near metropolitan areas.

Ten sites -- including Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, New Mexico's Los Alamos and Sandia national laboratories and Rocky Flats near Denver -- contain enough weapons-grade plutonium and highly enriched uranium to make a nuclear device, the report said.

A nuclear detonation at any one of them, investigators wrote, "would dwarf the impacts of Chernobyl, potentially kill or injure millions of Americans and destroy the environment of a significant portion of the United States." Calling the dispersion of nuclear materials an unnecessary Cold War holdover, the report recommends closing some facilities, such as Idaho National Engineering Lab and Washington's Hanford Nuclear Reservation.

It also recommends combining Livermore and Los Alamos labs since "we don't need two redundant bomb design labs" and Livermore "is now in the middle of a highly populated community, yet large amounts of plutonium are stored there."

The investigation, members of the group said, was initiated when more than one dozen whistle-blowers contacted the group with unclassified material highlighting their concerns. The 43-page report is based on letters, memos, declassified documents and scores of public documents dating back to 1990 about the state of the nation's nuclear security. It was in the final editing stages Sept. 11, said Danielle Brian, executive director of the Project for Government Oversight.