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Error at lab spreads nuclear material

Contamination from Los Alamos found in 4 states

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The apparent mishandling of a potentially hazardous radioactive substance by an employee of the University of California-run Los Alamos National Laboratory has resulted in contamination of sites in four states, according to a report released Monday.

Traces of the substance have been found in homes in Colorado and Kansas that the Los Alamos employee visited, his own home in New Mexico, and also at the Pennsylvania laboratory where the em-

ployee apparently shipped a contaminated package via FedEx.

Los Alamos doctors are monitoring the health of the employee and five lab colleagues who might have been contaminated by the substance, radioactive americium-241. So far, none show ill effects, lab officials said Monday.

Los Alamos investigators uncovered the incident and reported it in a July 27 press release, but a more extensive internal report by lab officials, obtained by the Project on Government Oversight (POGO), a Washington-based watchdog group, was released Monday.

"The package could have con-
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taminated Federal Express workers and other packages," Beth Daley, a POGO spokeswoman, told The Chronicle. "Surprisingly, it took Los Alamos two full days after it discovered the initial contamination incident to notify (the Pennsylvania laboratory) that it was in possession of an unmarked radioactive package."

It shows "there's a complete lack of accountability when it comes to health and environmental protection at the lab," Daley added. "It's a sign that the DOE needs to rein UC in. One way to do that is to start fining the university when it violates its regulations and laws."

Los Alamos spokeswoman Kathy DeLucas said the lab's investigation of the incident is still under way. She declined to identify any of the people who are being monitored medically, to protect their privacy.

The Los Alamos employee normally worked in Los Alamos' Building 66 and studied ways to weld together nuclear fuel pellets for production of fuel for nuclear reactors, DeLucas said. She said a radiological control technician discovered the contamination July 25 while monitoring the building lab for unusual levels of radiation.

The lab reported July 27 that it had found contamination of the employee's work space, car and in several locations inside his home. It also found radiological contamination to the employee's skin and clothing.

Subsequently, lab investigators have found traces of the radioactive substance at the West Mifflin, Pa.,

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BETH DALEY, spokeswoman for Project on Government Oversight

lab of Bettis Laboratory, which had received a FedEx package from the employee, and at homes in Colorado and Kansas that he had visited.

The FedEx package was shipped on July 20 as a nonhazardous, domestic unclassified shipment from Los Alamos to Bettis Laboratory, which according to its Web site, "plays a key role in all aspects of the (U.S.) Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program."

DeLucas declined to identify where in Colorado or Kansas the contamination occurred. Authorities are still trying to determine how the contamination occurred.

There is disagreement over the potential health risks of the contamination. July 27, lab officials said the amount of radioactivity that traveled away from Los Alamos "is a fraction of the radioactivity contained in a typical residential smoke detector . . . (The) extremely low levels of radioactive material found at the employee's home do not pose a credible risk to the general public."

But POGO officials said they were disturbed by news of the contamination. "The nuclear contaminant involved, americium-241, is far more deadly than 'normal' plutonium if inhaled, despite rosy depictions by the laboratory's public relations office. One speck of the material inhaled can cause cancer," Daley said.

According to a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Web site, "americium poses a significant risk if enough is swallowed or inhaled . . . It generally stays in the body for decades and continues to expose the surrounding tissues to radiation. This may eventually increase a person's chance of developing cancer, but such cancer effects may not become apparent for several years."

UC manages the lab under contract to the U.S. Department of Energy. At present, UC and a few industrial partners, including Bechtel National, are competing for the next Los Alamos management contract with another team led by aerospace giant Lockheed Martin and the University of Texas. DOE is expected to announce the winner by Dec. 1.

UC spokesperson Chris Harrington declined Monday to comment on the americium-241 contamination.