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LIVERMORE

Major cuts planned at nuclear labs

Lawrence Livermore, Los Alamos among sites destined for new role as nation reduces its stockpile of nuclear weapons

David Perlman, Chronicle Science Editor

Tuesday, March 18, 2008



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The nation's nuclear weapons agency, already committed to slashing the size of America's battle-ready arsenal of bombs and warheads, is planning major cutbacks and transformations at its complex of laboratories and bomb-making plants across the country - including Livermore and Los Alamos.

Barred by Congress from developing new warheads to replace the decaying weapons of the Cold War, the agency intends to harness the skills of its scientists and engineers for research into counterterrorism, intelligence and nuclear nonproliferation, while continuing to assure that the remaining weapons stockpile is "safe and reliable," said Thomas d'Agostino, director of the National Nuclear Security Administration.

Even so, the plans by d'Agostino's agency to revamp the complex of nuclear research and weapons production sites are controversial. After recent public hearings in other parts of the country, officials are moving into Livermore territory today. They will outline their proposals and gather public comments at hearings in Tracy this evening and at Livermore Wednesday.

At the same time, a coalition of anti-nuclear groups, led by the watchdog group called Tri-Valley CARES, plans to demonstrate against all nuclear weapons work at Livermore and protest the pace of the agency's long-term schedule to move all remaining plutonium - a major bomb component - out of the Livermore lab and far away to a fuel-conversion plant in South Carolina.

Together with the Los Alamos National Laboratory, the Livermore lab has until now long been the nation's leading center of nuclear weapons research and development.

More nondeployed weapons

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In a phone interview Monday, d'Agostino, whose agency is a branch of the U.S. Energy Department, said that America's goal by 2012 has been to keep no more 1,700 to 2,200 nuclear weapons ready for action by its submarines and planes, in keeping with a treaty forged by President Bush and Russia's Vladimir Putin in 2001 to reduce their nations' "operationally deployed" weapons drastically. That goal, he said, was reached last year, and since then the White House has ordered an additional 15 percent cut in deployed weapons.

D'Agostino said the number of nondeployed weapons in the stockpile is classified, but "it is quite significantly higher" than the total of those ready for action.

Estimates by defense specialists outside the government, however, have put the number of weapons currently in the nuclear stockpile at more than 9,000 long-range missile warheads and bombs. "By 2012 - that's only four years from now - we will have cut the stockpile by more than 70 percent, and if we don't need to maintain our Cold War stockpile, then we don't need to keep plutonium and uranium in as many locations," d'Agostino said.

He said his agency already has sent two shipments of stored plutonium from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory to the nuclear facility at Savannah River, S.C., where it is being blended with natural uranium to create "mixed oxide" fuel for nuclear power reactors.

D'Agostino said all the Livermore plutonium and uranium will be removed by 2012, but security specialists at the Project on Government Oversight, a Washington watchdog group, say that's not soon enough. They say dangerous ingredients of nuclear weapons - including Livermore's store of weapons-grade uranium - could safely be moved to the Savannah River site this year - and it should be, because the Livermore lab's anti-terrorist defensive weapons are not strong enough to protect the material.

For many years concerns about the safety and reliability of America's nuclear stockpile due to possible corrosion and other chemical changes during their many decades in storage have prompted weapons leaders to seek designs for a "Reliable Replacement Warhead." D'Agostino said it was he who selected a Livermore warhead design for development a year ago because it was based on one that was tested underground in Nevada many years ago and would need no further testing.

Warhead development over?

Congress has cut the budget for further development of the Livermore design, but there's still a little money available and d'Agostino said "it's important to finish a technical study" of the design. It might take \$25 million to do it, he said, but "Livermore is not designing a replacement warhead and we are not going to build a warhead."

At Livermore lab's 7,000-acre "Site 300," located about 6 miles south-southwest of

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Tracy, scientists conduct research into the components of nuclear warheads that use conventional high-explosives as triggers for the weapons.

D'Agostino said all studies using powerful high explosives would eventually be moved from the Livermore facility to the agency's Nevada Test Site north of Las Vegas, where for many decades after World War II all new nuclear weapons were test-fired- first in the atmosphere and later underground - before all testing was banned by treaty.

The hearings at Tracy and Livermore will go into the details of changes contemplated for the lab and its staff of scientists and engineers, but d'Agostino said that the total number of employees would remain about the same.

The work of the nuclear specialists there, he said, would change however - from looking into weapons issues to research into the technical aspects of enforcing international nonproliferation agreements, protecting against nuclear terrorist attacks, and providing intelligence agencies with the technical know-how to keep watch over clandestine weapons developments world-wide.

All this leaves antinuclear groups highly dubious, and representatives of a coalition of organizations including the local Sierra Club, the Bay Area Physicians for Social Responsibility and the American Friends Service Committee will be demonstrating, distributing their information materials and testifying at the hearing.

"The Department of Energy's 'Complex Transformation' plan, which we call the bombplex, is intended to design, test and build the euphemistically titled Reliable Replacement Warhead, and other new and modified nuclear bombs," said Tri-Valley CARES leader Marylia Kelley.

In fact, Kelley said, the plan's most salient feature is building whole new bomb plants to churn out new nuclear weapons for decades to come.

"We favor a curatorship approach to maintain the safety and reliability of the existing nuclear weapons stockpile as it awaits dismantlement under the provisions of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty," she said.

Weigh in

The National Nuclear Security Agency's meeting schedule:

-- **Tracy**, from 6 to 10 p.m. tonight, Holiday Inn Express, 3751 N. Tracy Blvd.

-- **Livermore**, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. Wednesday, the Robert Livermore Community Center, 4444 East Ave.

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