

Project On Government Oversight

Exposing Corruption Exploring Solutions www.POGO.org

November 17, 2009

The Honorable Steven Chu
Secretary, U.S. Department of Energy
1000 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20585

VIA FACSIMILE: (202) 586-4403

Dear Secretary Chu:

We were shocked to learn that Los Alamos National Laboratory's Plutonium Facility (PF-4) once again had to stop its main operations because of the inadequacy of its fire suppression system—only three and a half years after a complete overhaul of that system was paid for by the taxpayers.

Apparently, PF-4 had to be put into “standby mode” for a month because sprinklers covering 13 of the 100 areas in the facility were found not to function properly. By our estimates, if each area has a minimum of 10 sprinklers, at least 130 sprinklers were deficient. The only good news is that this problem was discovered before there was a fire in one of those areas. On the not-so-bright side, two weeks ago, the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (DNFSB) found that the facility would be vulnerable to a catastrophic fire in the case of a severe earthquake. However, it does not take an earthquake to start a fire.

There should be no reason this problem was not resolved after a similar problem was uncovered in the same building in early 2006. At that time, PF-4 was forced to shut down for over a month when it was discovered that 300 of 1,000 sprinkler heads in the fire suppression system had been non-functional for years because they had been painted over. POGO alerted then-Secretary Samuel Bodman as well as Congress. LANL spent more than \$10 million to replace the sprinkler heads, which was reimbursed by the government.

This time, taxpayers should not foot the bill for the repairs, or for the salaries of the PF-4 employees for the month that the facility was not operational. These costs should be considered unallowable expenses as part of DOE's contract with LANL, and LANL itself should have to pay.

If you have any questions or need further information, please feel free to contact Senior Investigator Peter Stockton at (202) 347 -1122.

Sincerely,



Danielle Brian
Executive Director

1100 G Street, NW
Suite 900
Washington, DC
20005-3806
Phone: 202-347-1122
Fax: 202-347-1116

www.POGO.org
pogo@pogo.org

501(c)(3) ORGANIZATION