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August 10, 2004

G. Peter Nanos  
Director, Los Alamos National Laboratory  
P. O. Box 1663  
Los Alamos, NM 87545

Dear Director Nanos,

Thank you very much for the difficult decision you made to stand down operations at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) so that serious security and safety issues could be addressed.

There is, however, another critical security and safety problem that the staffs of LANL and Department of Energy (DOE) headquarters have ignored for several years. It relates to an immense discrepancy in the accounts for how much plutonium is in the waste at LANL. We suggest that this issue be considered and resolved before LANL resumes full-scale operations.

The problem was discovered in January 1996 when then-Secretary of Energy Hazel O'Leary published a report entitled Plutonium: The First Fifty Years as part of her openness initiative. At that time Admiral Richard J. Guimond, then Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Environmental Management, and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Defense Programs Everet H. Beckner prepared a memorandum detailing plutonium accounting discrepancies throughout the nuclear weapons complex. That memorandum is attached to this letter.

The Guimond-Beckner memorandum shows that the security-related nuclear materials accounts do not agree with the waste accounts. The Department of Energy reported a discharge to waste from LANL of 610 kilograms of plutonium; Los Alamos indicates a figure of 1,375 kilograms (Attachment B of the memorandum). Evidently, there is a discrepancy of 765 kilograms, the equivalent of 150 nuclear weapons. This is unacceptable by any imaginable standards and constitutes a crucial security, environmental, and safety issue.

Attachment B to the memorandum also clearly shows that the plutonium accounting discrepancy is by far the largest for Los Alamos. The second largest discrepancy of 391 kilograms is at Savannah River Site, mainly relating to the high-level waste tanks.

The huge discrepancy at LANL is especially troubling and puzzling because Los Alamos was not continuously an industrial-scale production site. If the LANL number is anywhere close to correct, then there may be very serious implications regarding the lack of due care in minimizing losses of an extremely expensive, proliferation-sensitive, and dangerous material.

On the other hand, if the 1,375 kilograms that is now booked as waste is not, in fact, in the waste, the security implications are obvious. They are at least as serious as those of loss of nuclear weapon design information. As you know, the difficulty of obtaining fissile materials is generally considered the most important barrier to proliferation.

As the Guimond-Beckner memorandum states, Secretary O'Leary set up a working group to address the issue and urged individual sites to do so as well. The DOE working group seems to have melted away in the bureaucracy. To the best of our knowledge, LANL has yet to explain the large plutonium accounting discrepancy or address its security implications.

It is completely unacceptable for a discrepancy of 150 bombs worth of plutonium to remain on the books eight years after it was first discovered. We hope that you agree. Since you have already stood down LANL on other security and safety issues, we request that you seize this moment and immediately appoint an independent task force to investigate this issue until it is resolved. We believe it is important to continue the stand down of all plutonium operations, including those at TA-55 and the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research building, until the accounting discrepancy is sorted out and LANL's plutonium books are reconciled.

We look to you to take this courageous and necessary action now. Please address questions regarding the memorandum to Arjun Makhijani at 301-270-5500 or 301-365-6723 or arjun[at]ieer.org. You can reach Jay Coghlan 505-989-7342 or jay[at]nukewatch.org and Joni Arends at (505) 986-1973 or jarends[at]nuclearactive.org.

Yours Sincerely,

Arjun Makhijani, Ph.D.  
President, Institute for Energy and Environmental Research

Jay Coghlan  
Executive Director, Nuclear Watch of New Mexico

Joni Arends  
Executive Director, Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety

cc: Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham  
U.S. Senator Pete Domenici  
U.S. Senator Jeff Bingaman  
U.S. Representative Tom Udall  
U.S. Representative Heather Wilson  
U.S. Representative Steve Pearce  
New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson  
National Nuclear Security Administration Administrator Linton Brooks  
University of California President Robert Dynes  
U.S. Representative Sherwood Boehlert, Chairman, House Science Committee  
U.S. Representative Bart Gordon, Ranking Member, House Science Committee  
U.S. Representative Duncan Hunter, Chairman, House Armed Services Committee

U.S. Representative Ike Skelton, Ranking Member, House Armed Services Committee  
U.S. Representative Joe Barton, Chairman, House Energy and Commerce Committee  
U.S. Representative John Dingell, Ranking Member, House Energy and Commerce Committee