

Congress Probes Drug Probe at Livermore Lab

Allegations that an undercover drug investigation was prematurely ended to avoid embarrassment are strenuously denied

TWO YEARS AGO, an undercover investigation at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory turned up evidence implicating several laboratory workers in the buying and selling of illegal drugs at the facility. The investigation, known as Operation Snowstorm, led to the arrest and conviction of six offenders and the resignation of ten other employees of the lab or on-site contractors.

Another successful sortie in the war on drugs? Not according to the investigators who took part in the operation.

They testified at congressional hearings last week that Operation Snowstorm was shut down by senior laboratory managers in September 1986 over their objections, leaving many leads unresolved. The undercover detective in the operation, Robert Buda, also said he was "flabbergasted" when the investigation was terminated just 3 days before he received a high-level security clearance that would have enabled him to follow up allegations of drug dealing in some of the most tightly restricted areas of the lab.

The investigators' objections to the way the operation was shut down provided the opening testimony in a grueling 6½-hour public postmortem on the affair by the House subcommittee on investigations and oversight, chaired by the redoubtable John Dingell (D-MI). Representative Ron Wyden (D-OR) set the tone early on, when he suggested that "Operation Snowstorm should have been named Operation Snow Job." The Department of Energy, which funds the lab, "seems to believe the most serious threat from drug abuse is bad publicity," Wyden charged. The implication was clear: the operation was shut down to avoid embarrassing the lab.

Lab officials strenuously denied the allegation. John S. Hunt, head of safeguards and security at Livermore, said the probe was initially expected to last only 4 to 6 months but in fact ran for more than 8 months. It was shut down, he said, in order to arrest the prime suspects and "send a message" to other lab employees that drug abuse will not be tolerated at the facility.

Operation Snowstorm was launched in January 1986 following sporadic allegations of drug trafficking among lab personnel and

employees of contractors working at the facility. Buda, a detective with the University of California, conducted the investigation under cover of employment as a truck driver for a contractor.

According to David Leary, a Livermore security officer who ran the operation, Buda made his first drug purchase within a week, and by the end of April, 24 users and 11 dealers had been identified. The predominant drug was methamphetamine, but cocaine, psilocybin, marijuana, methaqualone, and barbiturates were also bought, sold, or used on site, Leary testified.

The suspects were mostly trade and service personnel, but they included several

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employees who had "Q" clearance, which permits access to restricted areas. Buda testified that he had 13 "specific and definite" leads on individuals with Q clearance, but he could not monitor drug transactions in restricted areas because at the time he lacked clearance himself.

According to Leary, Buda, and three other investigators who testified at the hearing, Operation Snowstorm continued to produce new leads throughout the summer. But their superiors, with support from senior DOE officials, began making plans to wrap the investigation up.

Hunt testified that "the allegations . . . had virtually remained unchanged since the April 1986 time frame." Richard DuVal, who at the time was head of DOE's San Francisco office, said he felt there was need to take decisive action "to make clear to the employees that we had a tough drug policy

at that facility."

Termination of the operation was temporarily delayed, however, because one of the prime suspects, a truck driver, was also being investigated by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). According to testimony by a DEA investigator, he was believed to be associated with two clandestine laboratories in the Livermore area that were making methamphetamine, and the agency wanted to collect additional evidence that might be used to turn the suspect into an informer. The DEA investigator told the committee that because of pressure from the laboratory, the suspect was arrested prematurely on 18 September. Five others were arrested the following day and Operation Snowstorm was terminated. Three days later, Buda received his Q clearance.

The day after the arrests, Hunt was quoted in the local press as saying that the arrest of only six people in a total work force of more than 8000 indicates that "we do not have a large drug problem."

If the hearing failed to resolve the dispute over the termination of Operation Snowstorm, it did produce clear evidence that one case was badly mishandled by senior laboratory managers.

According to a memorandum by staff investigators on Dingell's subcommittee, Ronald Stump, a chemist with access to classified material who had been employed at Livermore for 26 years, had been the target of probes by law enforcement agencies because of "numerous and widespread allegations of serious wrongdoing related to drug activity." Operation Snowstorm apparently did not turn up fresh evidence on Stump, but in April 1987 he suddenly disappeared and his whereabouts remain unknown.

According to the staff memo, \$11,000 worth of gold, platinum, and silver charged to Stump is missing, and he may have been involved in a kickback scheme related to "the fraudulent purchase of a \$250,000 piece of technical equipment." Laboratory officials acknowledged that they neither looked into the national security implications of Stump's access to classified material nor followed up the kickback allegations until pressured to do so by the subcommittee staff. Stump was indicted on 30 March 1988, just 1 day before the statute of limitation would have expired.

One unfortunate result of the dispute over Operation Snowstorm, says John Nuckolls, who took over as director of the lab a few weeks ago, is that "the publicity may leave the impression that the drug problem at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory is greater than in the nation as a whole," an impression he says is false. ■ COLIN NORMAN