

Changes at Brookhaven Shock National Lab System

Energy Secretary Federico Peña delivered a personal message to Brookhaven National Laboratory managers last week—but it was not, as some might have expected, a homily to mark the lab's 50th birthday. Instead, Peña announced that he intends to end the government's contract with the New York lab's operator, Associated Universities Inc. (AUI). And he excoriated Brookhaven management for "unacceptable and inexcusable" behavior in dealing with a series of toxic spills and leaks. "Doing excellent science does not excuse lapses in environment, safety, and health management," Peña said.

The surprise decision by the new secretary is sending shock waves through the Department of Energy (DOE) and its network of laboratories around the country, most of which are run by private contractors. It's being seen as evidence of a new, get-tough attitude by federal officials that lab directors would ignore at their peril. "[Peña] sent a very clear message to all of us: Scientific excellence is important, but he expects operational excellence as well," says William Madia, director of Pacific Northwest National Laboratory.

It's also a watershed event for Brookhaven, a \$400 million a year lab with 3000 employees. The lab is home to the High-Flux Beam Reactor (HFBR)—one of the nation's premier neutron-scattering facilities—and other machines used for a host of materials, biological, and medical research experiments.

The storm that has engulfed Brookhaven has been brewing since the 1980s, when community activists on Long Island succeeded in shutting down the nearby Shoreham nuclear plant. A series of chemical and radionuclide leaks at the lab over the past decade, combined with a 1994 fire at the HFBR, heightened safety concerns and soured relations between the lab and its neighbors. The anger of local residents reached fever pitch this winter, when Brookhaven revealed a tritium leak at the HFBR. The reactor, shut down last fall for maintenance, will remain closed while technicians pin down the source of the leak, which has spread in a plume underneath the lab grounds, and monitor its impact. DOE officials now believe there has been a continuous leak for more than a decade, although they say it poses no threat to the region's drinking water.

Such problems, however, have already had a far-reaching effect on the lab itself. An extensive evaluation of Brookhaven's safety-management program released last week blames both DOE and AUI—a Washington-based consortium of nine northeastern universities—for failing to deal with a host of environmental, health, and safety problems. The study found confusion at DOE headquarters, field offices, and among DOE officials at Brookhaven over who was responsible for enforcing regulations. Adding to the problem is Brookhaven's status as a multiprogram lab, which means that several DOE offices oversee it. The study calls for better department coordination of environmental and health issues "and more effective and efficient allocation of funding and resources" in these areas. It also says the relationship between DOE and Brook-



Lab brass. Secretary Peña (left) introduces Brookhaven to its new DOE boss, John Wagoner.

haven officials is too cozy.

For now, the heaviest blow falls on AUI, which Peña says failed to abide by DOE regulations while playing down local concerns. DOE will hold a new competition, and a new contractor will be selected within the next 6 months. The contractor will appoint a new lab chief. AUI, which has run Brookhaven since its inception in 1947, is free to bid, says Martha Krebs, DOE energy research chief. The secretary has given Krebs, whose office is the largest overseer of Brookhaven, a month to come up with a plan to correct the problems laid out in the report and to address DOE's failure to respond adequately to the Long Island community. In the meantime, John Wagoner, manager of the DOE office in Richland, Washington, will oversee the lab, while the Environmental Protection Agency conducts an independent inspection of the facility's environmental problems.

Longtime Brookhaven director Nicholas Samios, who stepped down on 30 April as part of a long-planned transition of management, acknowledges that "upper management should have done more" to address the concerns. "We could have moved more aggressively," says Samios, now a researcher at the lab. And he admits that Brookhaven failed to bridge the gap between local residents and the lab: "Our outreach program probably wasn't as large as it should have been." But he also blames what he calls an "antiscience" attitude among the public. "People are frightened of radiation," he says. "It's a problem of ignorance."

Local activists, who say their complaints were swept under the rug, bristle at such statements. And Brookhaven's insensitivity to local fears draws a harsh reaction from some DOE officials as well. "This is an example of the arrogance of the scientific community," says one DOE manager, who notes that the lab is "in the backyard of Shoreham and still they didn't get the message."

Peña appeared particularly angry last week about what he called the lab's loss of public trust. AUI Chair Paul Martin, dean of engineering and applied sciences at Harvard University, says "there's no doubt there has been quite a bit of hubris" among some Brookhaven scientists, although he says those at Harvard and other universities can be equally arrogant. He adds that Samios didn't make many friends in Washington during his 15-year tenure—and angered Senator Alfonse D'Amato (R-NY)—by his response to the environmental questions being raised. "Maybe we should have beat on [Samios] more," he says about AUI's duty to oversee the lab. But he insists that Peña moved precipitously to terminate the contract, given AUI's recent efforts to find a new director and to impose a stricter system of monitoring problems such as the tritium leak.

Privately, some AUI officials say they are victims of Peña's desire to appear decisive after being criticized for his handling of the 1996 ValuJet crash in Florida while he was transportation secretary. They also decry D'Amato's efforts to win Long Island votes by vilifying Brookhaven. "We're the whipping boy," says one AUI manager.

Local critics have applauded Peña's actions, although they say their work is not done. "I'm cautiously optimistic," says William Smith, director of Fish Unlimited, a national organization located near Brookhaven. But he said critics still plan to file suit this summer against the lab for failing to abide by federal environmental regulations.

AUI's fate serves as a clear warning to other lab managers. "I don't think we have any problems—but as of this morning, you can be sure we're double-checking," says Madia.

—Andrew Lawler

ROGER STOUTENBURGH/BROOKHAVEN NATIONAL LABORATORY