

STATEMENT

LABORATORY RESPONSE TO ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OF RECEIPT OF SELECT AGENT PRESUMED TO BE VIRULENT

May 7, 2002 -- Los Alamos National Laboratory's Bioscience (B) Division has undertaken several actions in response to an administrative review of the circumstances surrounding the Laboratory's receipt last October of a biological sample presumed to be virulent.

"We appreciate the very thorough review the team provided us and agree with the observations and suggestions for improvement the team made that would have prevented this particular shipment from reaching Los Alamos," Jill Trehwella, Bioscience Division leader said. "I am very pleased that our workers made good decisions on handling this sample and that their own procedures were robust and adequate for dealing safely and responsibly with the shipment.

"Nonetheless, it is a priority for us to ensure that we have the formality of operations that would have prevented the shipment from happening in the first place. We have taken steps to strengthen our formality of operations and to ensure that managers and staff are fully aware of our authorized activities and the roles and behaviors expected of them," Trehwella said.

The National Nuclear Security Administration participated in the review by having a program official serve as an observer on the team. Los Alamos officials also have kept the NNSA informed of actions taken in response to the review.

The shipment last October involved a sample of material presumed to be contaminated with six spores of virulent, or infectious, anthrax bacteria. Los Alamos normally deals exclusively with the DNA from such samples and not the organism itself.

The sample was appropriately transported according to Department of Transportation requirements for infectious materials and upon arrival was treated so as to destroy any potential live agent. The sample shipment was accompanied by the documentation required by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for transport of select agent materials. The review team concluded "no experimentation was done with virulent material and no safety issue existed at any time."

The team made two recommendations to the Bioscience Division management to improve operations.

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1) Make the authorization basis for work with select agents and hazardous materials common knowledge

2) Practice line management responsibility for the communication of work authorization

These recommendations have been fully embraced by Bioscience Division management and are aimed at ensuring widespread awareness within the division of the authorization basis for work with select agents and hazardous materials, Trewhella said. An authorization basis specifies the range of activities approved for a facility. Select agents are certain pathogens identified by the CDC and are tracked and accounted for by federal regulations.

In response, Bioscience Division undertook the following actions:

1) Ensured awareness of and commitment to Integrated Safety Management by requiring staff to take the Safe Work Practices Implementation course, revising Hazard Control Plans so they more clearly implement the ISM process, and developing a library of safety and other materials so employees can review all applicable documentation in one location.

2) Clarified the roles of managers in work authorization and trained supervisors, workers and managers in the processes of work and worker authorization.

3) Created tracking tools to ensure that documentation and other protocols for biological shipments are followed.

4) Reminded managers and staff of the respective roles of line management and the Lab's Institutional Biosafety Committee in approving and authorizing work. Specifically, approval of work and work protocols by the IBC is necessary but not sufficient for work authorization with biological hazards.

5) Language in safety documentation has been formalized and clarified.

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The administrative review was led by Phil Thullen of the Health, Safety and Radiation Protection (HSR) Division. Other team members represented Los Alamos' Chemistry (C) and Physics (P) divisions and the Legal Counsel (LC) Office. The NNSA official was a senior technical advisor for bioscience from the NNSA's Albuquerque Operations Office.