

Congress limits moratorium on lab visits

[WASHINGTON] The US House of Representatives last week approved a 60-day moratorium on visits to US nuclear weapons laboratories by visitors from 'sensitive countries'. This forestalls the enactment of a more radical two-year moratorium.

The moratorium was approved as part of a package of 26 measures aimed at tightening laboratory security in the wake of the Chinese spy scandal. These were passed as part of a bill authorizing spending by the Department of Defense in the year 2000.

The 428-0 vote on the package, authored by congressmen Christopher Cox (Republican, California) and Norm Dicks (Democrat, Washington), virtually assures that the measures will be retained when House and Senate conferees meet to reconcile differences between their respective versions of the bill.

The moratorium will start 30 days after the bill becomes law, and is intended to be in

effect while the Department of Energy (DoE) institutes new vetting procedures for foreign scientists. The Secretary of Energy may waive the moratorium on a case-by-case basis.

The bill applies to foreign visitors to Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California, Los Alamos and Sandia National Laboratories in New Mexico, and The Oak Ridge National Laboratories in Tennessee.

A harsher, two-year moratorium on visits by scientists from sensitive countries including China, India and Russia was proposed by congressman Jim Ryun (Republican, Kansas) but defeated on a vote of 159-266.

The votes came two days after the chief science adviser to President Clinton warned that a "xenophobic" Congressional reaction to allegations of Chinese spying could imperil scientific excellence and national security at the three US nuclear weapons laboratories.

In a speech to the US Civilian Research



and Development Foundation, Neal Lane, the director of the White House Office for Science and Technology Policy, said that a Congressional moratorium on lab visits by foreigners "would severely hamper our efforts to control the post-Soviet arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, not only because it would block collaborative activities here, but also because it would immediately lead to curtailment of US access to sites in Russia".

He warned that a moratorium would hurt the labs' participation in international science, calling the proposals "bad for science — and bad for the nation".

Also last week, an advisory committee to DoE secretary Bill Richardson published a report backing international collaborations at DoE laboratories, which it described as "essential to the scientific and technological strength of the United States".

"These types of collaborations ... can be conducted without jeopardizing national security and should be continued," says the report from a working group of the Secretary of Energy Advisory Board, which was mandated in March to examine the department's Foreign Visits and Assignment Program.

Ryun challenges both Lane's criticisms and the findings of the report. "We cannot continue to sacrifice our national security in the name of science," he says. "Many of our most sensitive national secrets have been stolen, while there has been little progress in non-proliferation efforts throughout the world. It is time that Congress addressed the lack of accountability for security in our national nuclear laboratories."

The report to Richardson comes on the heels of a joint statement from the presidents of the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering and the Institute of Medicine, that "inappropriate restrictions on foreign visitors to DoE laboratories could weaken the United States scientifically and prompt retaliation" (see *Nature* 399, 294; 1999).

Meredith Wadman

Energy secretary reassures Asian Americans

[LIVERMORE, CALIFORNIA] Department of Energy secretary Bill Richardson began a morale-boosting tour of national laboratories last week to reassure Asian-American scientists that the recent Chinese spy scandal has not placed them under a broad cloud of suspicion (see above).

In the first such event, Richardson made a speech and took questions at a private meeting last Friday (11 June) with a largely Asian-American audience at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, where he was dedicating the laser target chamber of the National Ignition Facility (see page 622).

Richardson is planning to make similar addresses next week to Asian Americans at the Los Alamos and Sandia National Laboratories in New Mexico.

The Los Alamos meeting may be particularly tense given the international scrutiny of the spy scandal there, in which federal authorities suspect a Taiwanese-born scientist gave some of America's most sensitive nuclear secrets to the Chinese. No criminal

charges have been filed against the scientist, Wen Ho Lee, who was fired in March for security violations.

During the public dedication ceremony for the National Ignition Facility, Richardson told an audience of more than 500 scientists, laboratory employees and their families that the laser project couldn't be accomplished without the assistance of Asian-American scientists.

After the ceremony, Richardson spoke to nearly 400 Asian-American scientists and Livermore Laboratory personnel at a private meeting which officials had attempted to keep secret. Acting under instructions from the Department of Energy in Washington DC, Livermore officials gave false information about the secretary's schedule that day to prevent reporters from knowing of the private discussion.

According to Dorothy S. Ng, however, a civil engineer and structural analyst at Livermore who attended the meeting, representatives of long-established Asian-American groups at the

laboratory presented Richardson with considerable information reflecting their concerns. After the meeting, Ng, who was born in China but is a naturalized US citizen, said she was encouraged by the treatment she and other Asian Americans had received.

"We had a nice dialogue," said Ng, who has worked at the laboratory for 21 years. "We as a group have received a commitment from Richardson and Livermore management to try to correct the negative image. I am impressed that Livermore Laboratory management and the secretary are concerned about us." Congressmen who talk about the loyalty of Asian Americans at national laboratories, Ng said, should be "responsible in their comments and speak of proof and truth".

Livermore officials said that no scientist has quit their laboratory in the wake of the spy scandal. But Richardson is reported to have told the private meeting that one distinguished Asian-American researcher was said to have left the Los Alamos laboratory because of perceived hostility.

Rex Dalton