

Lab relations sour as 'missing disk' charges are proved false

Geoff Brumfiel, Washington

Two classified computer disks that allegedly vanished last summer at the Los Alamos nuclear-weapons laboratory in New Mexico never existed, according to an investigation by the government agency that oversees the lab.

The security lapse, together with an unrelated accident, led to a three-month shutdown of the laboratory last summer, with director Peter Nanos accusing scientists of operating in a "cowboy culture" (see *Nature* 430, 387; 2004). The conclusion that the disks never existed has infuriated many of the lab's researchers

"The talk in the halls is mutinous," says Doug Roberts, a computer scientist at the laboratory. "I've been at the lab for 20 years and morale has never been this bad before."

The Los Alamos National Laboratory has been battered in recent years by a wave of scandals. In 1999, it was the subject of national scrutiny when Wen Ho Lee, a Taiwanese-born scientist, was accused of smuggling nuclear secrets to China (see *Nature* 398, 96; 1999) and subsequently acquitted. In 2000, two computer hard drives containing classified data disappeared from a secure area inside the laboratory, only to reappear later behind a photocopier (see *Nature* 405, 725; 2000). And in 2003, the laboratory's director and deputy director resigned following accusations that they had improperly fired two whistleblowers who had alleged widespread theft at the lab (see *Nature* 421, 99; 2003).

The latest trouble for the laboratory began early last July, when an inventory of classified data in its weapons-physics directorate revealed that four disk drives were missing. Almost immediately, two of the drives were found to have been improperly moved to a different building, but another two could not be located. In response, Nanos shut down large parts of the laboratory and publicly chided the scientists working there for failing to follow security procedures. "This willful flouting of the rules must stop, and I don't care how many people I have to fire to make it stop," he wrote in the 2 August issue of the laboratory's newsletter.

But now it seems that the missing drives were in fact an artefact of flawed inventory procedures. According to the report by the National Nuclear Security Administration



Scold news: lab chief Peter Nanos's reproaches may spark mutiny.

(NNSA), which was released on 28 January, 12 barcodes used to catalogue classified disk drives were issued to a group that needed only 10. The extra barcodes were nevertheless included in a master list, and so when auditors conducted an inventory last July, they concluded that two disks were missing. "The allegedly missing disks never existed and no compromise of classified material has occurred," the report explains.

Many scientists at the laboratory say that the incident, together with Nanos's public rebuke, has profoundly damaged the relationship between Los Alamos researchers and the lab's management.

"Trust in upper management has been completely lost," says Brad Holian, who has worked as a theoretical physicist at the laboratory for 32 years. Holian says that the three-month shutdown was the breaking point for many already frustrated scientists. "We were told in the theoretical division that we couldn't write down calculations on the blackboard," he says. Many of his colleagues are leaving the lab, and Holian himself says that he plans to retire this March — years earlier than he had originally planned. "I think there are a lot of people in my situation," he says.

In a statement accompanying the report, NNSA administrator Linton Brooks said that the University of California, which oversees the laboratory, would be fined around \$5.1 million for what he describes as "major weaknesses in controlling classified material revealed by this incident". Chris Harrington, a spokesman for the university, says that some of the money for the fine will come from the laboratory's discretionary research budget. ■

Cancellation e-mail shakes recipients of outer-planet grants

Tony Reichhardt, Washington

In the end, it was put down to a misunderstanding. But dozens of planetary scientists were enraged last week to be told — erroneously, as it turned out — that their NASA grants had been terminated.

Curt Niebur, who administers the US space agency's research programme for the outer planets, wrote to grantees on 24 January saying: "I regret to inform you that the [fiscal year 2005] funds to support this program have been redirected by the order of the NASA Administrator to meet other agency needs."

The money, which totals \$4.8 million for 55 grants, funds the analysis of data from missions such as Galileo and Cassini, as well as the basic research that lays the foundations for future missions.

Niebur's letter prompted a flurry of e-mails and an immediate reaction from the Division for Planetary Sciences of the American Astronomical Society. Grantees were asked to contact Congress, and to write testimonials about the negative effects of suddenly losing their funding. One postdoc wrote: "I just moved across the country to work. Now I have no job."

Almost immediately, NASA science managers began back-peddalling, claiming that the problem had been blown out of proportion. On 27 January, Andrew Dantzler, acting director of the agency's Solar System division, wrote to the grantees: "Your Outer Planets Research funding has not been cut." Instead, he wrote, it was being moved to another account "for purely administrative reasons".

It was all due to miscommunication within his office, Dantzler says — and it won't happen again. The office has no plans to cut grant money, he adds, calling his research funding "quite healthy".

But Dantzler acknowledges that "the timing couldn't have been worse", coming just as scientists fear the imminent cancellation of NASA's Jupiter Icy Moons Orbiter mission (see *Nature* 433, 342; 2005). The flap demonstrates just how edgy space researchers have become, with every day bringing fresh rumours of cuts to NASA science programmes, such as servicing of the Hubble telescope.

In their initial anger, some scientists were clearly prepared to think the worst of NASA. One anonymous e-mail said: "This administration's attitudes toward basic science and education are extremely disappointing." ■