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Analysis: Yucca work reviewed, redone

By Ben Lando

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The director of the Yucca Mountain Project says he's making the controversial quality assurance culture of the proposed nuclear waste repository in Nevada a priority as the U.S. Energy Department prepares to submit a license to open the facility. But the historical ignoring or tamping down of problems has deep roots, a former auditor says, and the results are still being felt.

"If you were to ask me, 'So, given what you're doing this year, in 2007, and the work that's leading up to developing this license application, how much of it is new and how much of it is review and rework of work that's been done before?', I don't have an exact number, but I'm betting ... at least 60 percent of the work we're doing this year ... work that's been done before," Edward "Ward" Sproat, director of the Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management, told reporters Tuesday at a briefing organized by The Energy Daily and the nuclear company Areva.

The Energy Department says that by June 2008 it will submit an application to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission for a license to store radioactive waste created by nuclear plants and weapons inside Yucca Mountain, 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

"There's a fundamentally different approach by the senior management team than this program has ever had before," said Sproat, who's been on the job less than a year. "And we recognize that behaviors of managers below us have in the past been major contributors to some of these problems and we have made changes in those management teams."

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., has led the charge of members of Congress to oppose the site, which is also opposed by the Nevada state government and other groups.

And, more than anything, they've been buoyed by claims the science behind the site won't wash.

"For us, early on, we felt that we had identified almost all the major quality assurance problem areas that needed to be fixed," Kristi Hodges, a former lead auditor on the project, told United Press International during numerous interviews. "Instead of concentrating on fixing those issues, they concentrated on fixing quality assurance so we could no longer identify these problems."

Hodges, who spent 17 years there at the project, resigned in August 2006. In February 2002, she decided to speak up, sending a complaint to the Energy Department's inspector general detailing circumstances surrounding the removal of a head quality assurance director from the project and the firing of the quality assurance program manager, "railroaded," she said, "after bringing evidence of malfeasance in project investigations" to Sproat's predecessor.

"The managers oversaw audits for the Energy Department that were responsible for identifying significant deficiencies in areas software, data and models, including the very issues that eventually rocked the project when e-mails pertaining to falsification of data were discovered," she said. (A Labor Department investigation later found the firing of Mattimoe "extraordinarily egregious." Congressional hearings were held on the e-mails.)

The Las Vegas Review-Journal filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the complaint from the inspector general in June 2002. More than four years later, the newspaper received it, though much was missing from the original hundreds of pages. In fact, spokeswoman Marilyn Richardson told the paper it was summarized into a "two- or three-page" document, sent to those at the project named in the complaint, but never fully investigated.

"I didn't see anything that was insurmountable, except for politics and bad management," said Hodges, now a senior engineer for the Nevada Test Site, who still maintains multiple, inches-thick binders on the latest Yucca happenings.

"These people (scientists) have done awesome work, world class work, it's just the politics won't let them...they never see their work come to fruition," Hodges said.

"I don't think that the site is unsound. I just don't think they can prove that it is or is not," she said. "Until they acknowledge what they did to QA in the past, no one will believe current QA is good."

In an August 2006 report, the Energy Department's inspector general wrote: "While progress has been made in the construction and licensing process at Yucca Mountain, the department has continued to experience quality control deficiencies, which could affect the ongoing design, analysis, and eventual licensing of the repository."

Specifically, "quality assurance issues were not promptly identified, investigated, or resolved by the department;" "a corrective action program, implemented by the department as required by the NRC, was not effectively managing and resolving conditions adverse to quality;" and "as outlined in several OIG reviews over the past year, the DEPARTMENT must continue to improve quality assurance measures to assure the scientific reliability as well as the overall safety of the proposed repository."

"Your characterization that a number of the issues around quality of the program originate with management behaviors and/or lack of management awareness and sponsorship for and demand for high quality is absolutely right on the mark," Sproat said, responding to a UPI question at the briefing.

He says he's brought on a new team to focus on the quality assurance issues, ordered multiple assessments, and will soon develop "the get-it-right, fix-it-plan."

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