

DEFENSE NUCLEAR FACILITIES SAFETY BOARD

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January 25, 2010

The Honorable Thomas P. D'Agostino
Administrator
National Nuclear Security Administration
U.S. Department of Energy
1000 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20585-0701

Dear Mr. D'Agostino:

The Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (Board) has observed unacceptable processing of information concerning an emergent issue at Sandia National Laboratories (SNL) regarding components used in the W76 Mod 1 program. The lack of timely review and communication of new information from SNL personnel to those qualified to assess its safety impacts resulted in operations being performed by the Pantex contractor without a complete understanding of the hazards involved.

As part of the stockpile stewardship program, the design agencies of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) regularly produce new information that has the potential to affect ongoing operations at production facilities. The timely communication of this information—after it is determined to be mature and applicable—ensures an appropriate margin of safety is maintained for ongoing nuclear or nuclear explosive operations. It is critical that a process is in place to ensure this cycle of generation, analysis, and timely communication of information important to safety.

The Board understands that SNL and Pantex have scheduled a joint causal factors analysis of this event. Therefore, pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 2286b(d), the Board requests a briefing 30 days after completion of the causal factors analysis on its findings and any actions being taken to prevent recurrence of such an event.

Sincerely,

John E. Mansfield, Ph.D.
Vice Chairman

c: Ms. Patty Wagner
Mr. Steven C. Erhart
Mr. Mark B. Whitaker, Jr.