

Browne discusses morale issues at laboratory

LAM 3/21/00

By DANICA TUTUSH
Monitor Assistant Editor

"It's going to be difficult for us to fully recover until the most recent case (with the missing hard drives) and the Wen Ho Lee case, are over because they are sort of hanging over us," said John Browne, director of Los Alamos National Laboratory. "I think it doesn't affect everyone's daily work ... but everyone I talk to wants to get it resolved and behind us."

Browne spoke to the Monitor on Thursday about morale at the laboratory, something even he was willing to admit has been down among lab employees.

Browne said officials at the lab are trying to "remind people that we are still here for an important mission to accomplish for the country, that ultimately we will be judged by our performance."

Browne also said that ultimately the lab will be judged on its performance, whether it can do its work safely and protect the environment.

LANL'S
MORALE
CRISIS

"Now is the time to raise our performance up a level," Browne said, adding that this is what he's been telling managers.

Another way Browne said he believes the lab can counter the bad perceptions, is by getting national figures to speak on the lab's behalf. The lab needs positive visibility, both locally and nationally, he stressed.

Examples include recent visits from Sen. Howard Baker and Rep. Lee Hamilton to the laboratory, in which Baker remarked that LANL was still "the crown jewel of the laboratory system of the U.S."

"I think our people need to hear that balanced viewpoint, that not everything at the lab is bad. We are OK," Browne said. "People need to believe they are very important to this country. They can't just hear it from me all the time, but from people who are outside the immediate crisis."

Morale is often "driven by uncertainty, the

"Yes, we've been singed around the edges, but we still have a lot of outstanding people coming."

John Browne, director
Los Alamos National Laboratory

lack of clarity of what's going to happen to me personally," Browne explained.

There have been a lot of issues tossed on the table that have caused employees' anxieties, Browne acknowledged, one of the most recent ones being the University of California contract.

"The University of California, I personally think, if you look at what they've said and done, they've been extremely supportive of maintaining the contract between themselves and the Department of Energy," Browne said.

Browne said he's had discussions with both the UC Board of Regents and Department of Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, regarding the contract, and in Browne's opinion, Richard-

son wants to "strengthen the contract with the UC."

"I don't believe he has any intention of doing anything, except finding a way that the University of California contract can be extended and perhaps strengthened at the same time, without damaging the employees here," he said.

Browne also stressed that he believes it is crucial the lab maintain a university presence to attract young scientists in the future. "Probably right now, it's more important than ever to have a university the quality of the UC to run us," Browne said.

The economy is one reason for such man-

(Please see BROWNE, Page 3)

BROWNE

(from Page 1)

agement, he said, because the laboratory now has to vie for engineering and scientific talent in a competitive marketplace.

But Browne also has a list of reasons one would prefer to work here. He cites his own reason for coming to the labs after graduate school in 1970.

"If you're a student at a university, you related to universities," Browne said. It's easier to make the transition to working to a university, he added.

"You have to have the ability to be in the scientific community," Browne said. People want to come and establish careers here. There is still the ability to publish papers; attend tech meetings across the country; and allow intellectual freedom.

"All those things are critical at this juncture," Browne pointed out and they are all things that have been effected by Congressional cuts to the lab in the last year.

Employees think morale is down, he said, but it is not due to any single thing.

"It's an accumulation of issues that after awhile it feels so heavy that you start to wonder what kind of place is this becoming," Browne said. He said he knows that some employees may be feeling that Congress is punishing the

lab.

For example, laboratory directed research and development (LDRD) funding, was cut from 6 percent to 4 percent, eliminating approximately \$25 million of funding went into some of the lab's most cutting-edge technology.

The lab's travel budget was also cut by 30 percent, based on a GAO report on travel expenses across all national laboratories. Then there was the moratorium on visiting foreign nationals, and there have been allegations of racial profiling and proposed boycotts of the labs by various scientific and Asian-American professional groups.

If all those factors weren't enough, there was also the impact of the Cerro Grande Fire.

"Emotionally I think people are spent," Browne said, but he is working to improve conditions.

Browne said he is making "strong appeals" to DOE and Congress to restore LDRD and travel monies; and lift the moratorium on foreign nationals. The latter, however, will require approvals from the DOE, CIA, and FBI, something that was close to completion when the hard drive incident happened.

"The hard drive incident sort of pushed that off the table," he said.

Still, Browne said he will contin-

ue to push forward. It is crucial because employees, "need to feel a little more freedom and flexibility in their jobs."

Browne is also quick to point out that scientific accomplishments have continued to happen, despite those other factors and perception of morale is still different from place to place within the lab.

"We need to focus on, 'Why are we here?' I need to support them by getting them enough resources to do their jobs and trying to minimize the amount of bureaucracy they face in doing their job," he said.

Browne said that from talking to people around the lab, he knows that people in X Division are feeling down. People in the physics division, on the other hand, he said, feel good about their research.

In DX Division, employees are feeling the impacts of the fire, as their work is still disrupted, while those working on the environmental and flood prevention project are feeling good, with a sense of pur-

pose, according to Browne. Whatever the case, Browne stressed that he knows communication is vital right now.

"People need to be heard," he said, "I am telling this to the division and group managers too."

The same concept applies to the feelings of Asian-American scientists at the lab, he said. One of the UC regents told him, for example, that you can't solve the problems at Berkeley, if you don't solve them here.

Browne also said that despite the hardship, some positive conditions still exist at the lab.

"We have a tremendous workforce still," he said. "Yes, we've been singed around the edges, but we still have a lot of outstanding people coming."

And he said he expects a decent working budget next year, one that's likely to match this year's \$1.3 billion for the laboratory.

"Yes, it's been difficult to deal with, but we should focus on the positive things," Browne said.