

Top U.S. science adviser visits LANL

► Lane calls low morale at lab in midst of security scandals 'a grave concern'

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The New Mexican

U.S. weapons laboratories, including Los Alamos, are facing "grave" troubles if the federal government goes overboard on security restrictions at the labs, President Clinton's science adviser said Tuesday.

Neal Lane, who advises Clinton on all matters of science and technology, visited Los Alamos on Tuesday and will be at Sandia National Laboratories today to talk about low morale at the labs in the wake of several security scandals.

Lane said he had lunch with a group of young scientists — physicists, biologists and chemists — and found many were thinking of looking elsewhere for work.

"This is the most dangerous



Laurent Guerin/For The New Mexican

Neal Lane, who advises the president on science and technology, visited Los Alamos on Tuesday to speak with lab employees about science and security.

issue facing national security," Lane said. "It's a grave concern."

Lane said scientists need reassurance from the federal government that they are trusted — and not dozens of pointless, stringent, security procedures.

"I don't know more patriotic people," he said. "We have Washington questioning their honesty, their integrity. ... and they don't necessarily believe you're going to make things more secure with new procedures."

"There's a lot of concern that the implementation of security may go too far," he said.

Lane also spoke in late September to the National Academies of Science about the inherent conflict between national security — which is obviously needed at the weapons labs — and pure science.

Openness is integral to good science, Lane believes, and good science is international. Scientists need to be able to communicate easily with people working on similar scientific questions to work more clearly on their own problems.

The question of science vs. security has become more prominent this year, especially after two hard drives containing nuclear secrets disappeared from the lab during the Cerro Grande fire.

Although the two disks reappeared behind a copy machine, Congress was harsh with

Department of Energy leaders and demanded that security be improved.

However, as Lane told the National Academies scientists, it was "a Congressional response that in many ways can only be described as 'ready, fire, aim.'"

Lane, who is in New Mexico this week to discuss science and security with the lab employees, said he will report back to Clinton about what is said.

"I'm here to help assess the current situation and to be sure the scientists know that we know how good their work is," Lane said.

The problem of scientists leaving has been worrying many weapons-lab officials for months. The population of bomb designers, for instance, is aging — the average nuclear-weapons designer is about 55.

Since the scandal over Wen Ho Lee, the Taiwan-born weapons scientist accused of mishandling nuclear secrets, the labs also have maintained they are having trouble recruiting new scientists.

"It's a good job market out there," Lane said.