

Nuclear-lab heads discuss recent years' woes

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The three directors of the nation's three nuclear weapons laboratories testified in Albuquerque Thursday about the troubles facing the labs after a couple of really bad years.

Their message: American weapons designers are getting gray, and the nation's smartest young scientists are making better money in high-tech jobs where security isn't

so tight and bad publicity doesn't make the work seem so ugly.

And sometimes, they said, the mission of watching over the U.S. stockpile of nuclear weapons — without designing or testing new bombs — isn't exciting work for bright minds.

"We can't say, 'We'd like you to come, with your advanced degrees, to be the maintenance workers for the nation's doomsday machines,'" said Paul Robinson, director of Sandia National Laboratories.

Jobs building bombs at the laboratories

are far less attractive now than they were even five years ago, the lab directors said. They provided pages of statistics showing that applicants aren't accepting jobs and not enough money is being spent on the "sexier" research science that attracts young scientists to begin with.

The directors — rarely together in the same room — testified at a forum at Sandia Laboratories before Rep. Heather Wilson, R-N.M., and the chairman of the subcommittee

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on energy and water, Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas.

Wilson and Barton travelled from Washington, D.C., to talk with the three top weapons officials about the future mission of the laboratories in the wake of a series of troubling episodes ranging from security breaches to wildfires.

Los Alamos National Laboratory director John Browne and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory director Bruce Tarter also testified, along with deputy directors from each laboratory.

But their two-person congressional audience wasn't always sympathetic, and Barton lightly scolded the directors for not taking security seriously enough.

Livermore and Los Alamos labs' administration and scientists are emphatically against any discussion of changing the federal government's 57-year-old contract with the University of California to manage the two laboratories.

But Barton, in a room filled with people who would disagree with him, said he believes it's time to put that contract up for bid — an idea that makes LANL officials squirm.

"After 50 years, I don't think (the University of California) is quite as sharp," Barton said. "Isn't it ever a good idea to change management?"

"No," said LANL deputy director William Press.

Press said LANL could lose 500 employees and many of its top scientists if the UC contract was abandoned.

But even Wilson said that's an exaggeration.

"I think you'd have nowhere near the catastrophic losses (you're talking about)," Wilson said. Sandia National Laboratories is managed by a private company, Lockheed Martin, for the Department of Energy. Several years ago, that lab went through a fairly smooth transition when AT&T gave up its management of Sandia, Wilson pointed out.

The group also talked about whether the labs really need to do work besides watching over weapons.

In presentations, each of the directors talked about other non-weapons work that grows out of bomb building — traffic-simulation software, decoding the human genome or countering biological terrorism.

But Barton said he's skeptical. "Is this really a good idea?" Barton asked. "These might be sexy (projects) but they don't reflect the core mission of ... national security."

Laboratory officials said that recent years have changed the balance of scientific power in the United States. Whereas a few decades ago, the nuclear laboratories had most of the money available for scientific research, private industry and universities now receive far more.

In order to know about all the best science going on in the country, the labs must work with outsiders.

"There are a lot more smart people outside the fence than inside the fence," said Bruce Tarter.