

NATION

Low morale plagues beleaguered Los Alamos atomic-research lab

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LOS ALAMOS, N.M. — The Los Alamos National Laboratory, birthplace of the atomic bomb and one of the country's pre-eminent centers for research on nuclear physics and supercomputing, is suffering from low morale, losing scientists to the private sector and having difficulty recruiting top-flight replacements.

In what surely must be the worst year in its storied history, the lab has been hammered by back-to-back FBI investigations into security lapses, intense congressional scrutiny, punitive budget cuts, an exodus of government computer experts to high-paying software companies, and an act of God — a wildfire that shut down the lab for 12 days

and forced the evacuation of surrounding towns.

If the lab remains under siege and cannot lift the spirits of its staff, administrators here and in Washington say, the United States may squander an asset that is as vital to national security as any military unit, weapon or secret.

"When you read all the things being written about this laboratory," said former director Siegfried S. Hecker, "anybody who has a choice has to think twice about coming to Los Alamos. I'm not sure we can recover quickly enough. A lot of damage has been done."

To be sure, extraordinary research still is going on at Los Alamos. The lab is building a 300,000-square-foot facility for

the world's most powerful computer, capable of performing 30 trillion operations per second. Los Alamos, which designed 85 percent of the nation's nuclear weapons and is responsible for certifying that the aging stockpile of warheads still is safe and reliable, will use the big machine to run three-dimensional simulations of nuclear explosions.

But 14 top computer scientists, nearly half of the permanent staff at Los Alamos' Advanced Computing Laboratory, have quit this year. Most were lured away by higher salaries and stock options at dot-com companies in nearby Santa Fe. Replacing them has not been easy. When Los Alamos recruiters made their annual visit last fall to Stan-

ford University, no one showed up to hear their pitch.

"People don't want to take lie-detector tests, they don't want to come to a place that has already been beaten down. And Los Alamos has been beaten down," said Patrick McCormick, 32, who heads a critical team working on computer visualizations of nuclear blasts and who fears his entire team could leave by the end of the year.

Anger — at the FBI, at Washington in general — is simmering

among the rank and file and has boiled over onto the lab's electronic bulletin board, the equivalent of a call-in radio show for the lab's tech-savvy staff of 7,000, including 1,800 holders of doctoral degrees.

"It should be clear by now that the lab is in a major crisis with morale at a very low point," William S. Varnum, a physicist in the top-secret X Division, said in an open message posted in July. "Many people are considering leaving. Individual staff mem-

bers are being harassed and threatened by management, the Department of Energy, University of California, the FBI and Congress. Management is making no visible effort to support the employees. In government and business activities throughout the world, when this happens, the people at the top offer their resignations as a means of helping to resolve these crises. I think it is time for laboratory upper management to consider doing the same."