

More than 2,000 lab workers could face polygraph tests

11/2/00 L.M.

The Associated Press

An anti-spying program included in the defense authorization bill could mean more than 2,000 Los Alamos National Laboratory employees would have to take lie detector tests.

Department of Energy officials have not counted the number of workers who would have to take the tests, said Douglas Hinckley, program director of the DOE's Counterintelligence Evaluation Board.

However, he said he believes most estimates are high because of the way the law is written. The bill lists various Energy Department programs covered by polygraph requirements, but many DOE employees belong to more than one program.

The anti-spying program has been criticized by many, including President Clinton, who signed the defense bill into law this week. Clinton called the program unrealistic and impractical.

In a statement posted on the White House Web site, he said the tests would be "counterproductive in this impact on our national security. The bill also micromanages the secretary of Energy."

Hinckley estimated 19,000 to 20,000 employees throughout the DOE must take lie detector tests. Some already took polygraph tests after last year's defense authorization bill pioneered such widespread testing in the agency.

Los Alamos lab spokesman Jim Danneskiold estimated Wednesday more than 2,000 Los Alamos workers would fall under the new regulations. About 100 already have taken lie detector tests, he said.

"We cannot determine the exact number," he said. "It would certainly exceed 2,000."

Danneskiold's estimate includes both employees covered under last year's guidelines and new DOE departments Congress added this year.

Sandia National Laboratories spokesman Rod Geer said the Albuquerque laboratory was waiting for Energy Department officials to interpret the wording in the

authorization bill before deciding how many people might have to be tested.

A couple hundred people at Sandia already are required to take polygraphs and have done so for years because of the work they do, Geer added.

Mass testing began amid concerns that spies were feeding nuclear secrets to the Chinese, according to a report from the Congressional Research Service.

Steven Aftergood, director of the Project on Government Secrecy at the Federation of American Scientists, said the validity of polygraphs has never been proven scientifically.

He said the big question is whether any benefit from testing outweighs morale problems the tests could cause.

"I am not aware that a single spy has been caught at Los Alamos using a polygraph," Aftergood said. "But I know it has had an impact on recruitment of new scientists (to the DOE) and probably has an impact on retention."

Hinckley said tests might deter potential spies.

"You want to be able to detect (espionage), but you'd rather be proactive in trying to prevent it in the first place," he said.

Last year's defense bill required up to 14,000 people to take lie detector tests, said Jane Brody, a DOE spokeswoman in Washington, D.C. She said the Energy Department thought that was too many, and that far fewer actually have taken the tests so far.

Congress, however, expanded polygraphs this year, adding four more programs. In all, about 5,000 people were added, Hinckley said.

Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., came out against further testing, saying polygraphs deflate the already shaken morale at the nation's weapons labs. In a news release, he said he hoped the department would be cautious in putting the law into effect.

Domenici will push to end the program within the next year, an aide said Wednesday.