

Domenici seeks more lab funding

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Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., on Tuesday began debate on his \$22.4 billion appropriations bill that funds the Department of Energy, and signaled his intention to offer two amendments aimed at shoring up sagging morale at the nation's nuclear weapons laboratories, a news release said.

The Senate on Tuesday evening resumed debate on the fiscal year 2001 Energy and Water Development Appropriations Bill (H.R.4733). Domenici, as chairman of the Senate Energy and Water Development Appropriations Subcommittee, will lead the debate until the bill is passed by the Senate, currently expected on Thursday.

While the bill already provides nearly \$5 billion for America's atomic energy defense activities, Domenici began Tuesday's debate by focusing on the declining morale

of employees at the national laboratories, which have been under intense congressional and law enforcement scrutiny following questions over security and management.

"Strong national laboratories are vital to assuring the integrity of our nuclear stockpile and preserving our ability to respond to complex technological challenges. The labs are being buffeted on many fronts," Domenici said. "I have increasing concerns over the ability of national labs to retain and attract the quality of staff needed to assure success in national security missions."

Domenici said the entire nuclear weapons complex is experiencing difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified employees. For example, three times as many scientists (237) left Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in the first

eight months of 2000 as left for all of FY1998, and nearly half of the scientists at the Los Alamos National Laboratory's Advanced Computing Laboratory left this year.

In addition, the acceptance rate for job offers at Sandia National Laboratories and LANL has fallen to rates near 50 percent. More than one third of the nuclear weapons workers are eligible for retirement, and virtually all the senior weapons designers are ready to retire.

"Clearly, we face a problem of a massive brain drain at the national laboratories if we cannot make these jobs more attractive to new generations of scientists," Domenici said.

Domenici outlined two amendments dealing with the Laboratory Directed Research and Development (LDRD) program and travel for scientific exchanges.

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The LDRD sets aside a percentage of funding from each laboratory's budget to fund research of the lab director's choosing. Domenici said he will offer an amendment to raise the current 6 percent limit to 8 percent.

"I believe raising the LDRD limit will help to reemphasize science at the labs, which I maintain will have a positive impact on the quality of the science at our national laboratories and on their ability to recruit and retain the talent needed to meet lab missions," Domenici said.

The second amendment would exempt scientific travel funded in LDRD accounts from the travel cap restrictions placed by Congress on other DOE travel.

Beyond his amendments, Domenici said he has attempted to craft the Energy and Water Development Appropriations Bill in a manner that will provide much-needed funding to tackle some very serious needs in the nuclear weapons complex, defense environmental clean-up, and in ongoing international

non-proliferation programs.

"I hope our lab employees will take heart with the funding we are providing to support their important work," Domenici said. "Large areas of the DOE nuclear weapons complex have not been managed well, and we're hoping the National Nuclear Security Administration will begin fixing those problems. We have buildings and facilities that are seriously outdated. I believe we are making headway with this bill to begin fixing those problems while we support the core missions of our labs."

Overall, the bill provides \$4.88 billion for DOE atomic energy defense activities, including the stockpile stewardship and stockpile management programs at Los Alamos and Sandia national laboratories in New Mexico and the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California. This is \$244 million more than the administration's budget request and a \$456 million increase over the FY2000 level.

To address laboratory security and management concerns, the bill contains \$336 million for security, an increase of \$213 million over last year's funding level. This includes \$21 million for nuclear safeguards and security, the same as the president's budget request, and, \$33 million for security investigations.

The bill provides \$909 million to support nuclear non-proliferation, an increase of \$43 million over the request and \$180 million above FY2000.

For Defense Environmental Management, the bill contains \$6.042 billion, a \$326 million increase over last year. This funding increase attempts to address needs at environmental management sites such as Savannah River and the Hanford site.

For New Mexico, Domenici provided \$204 million in contingent emergency funds for use at LANL, if necessary, for recovery from the Cerro Grande Fire that closed and damaged the lab in May.