

[DOE LETTERHEAD]

April 18, 1997

The Honorable John T. Conway
Chairman
Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board
625 Indiana Avenue, N.W.
Suite 700
Washington, D.C. 20004

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (DNFSB) approval letter for the Recommendation 93-6 Implementation Plan, you requested clarification of the Department's intent to ensure the long-term maintenance of safe testing capability if the program of hydronuclear experiments is not implemented. The intent of this letter is to provide the requested clarification by explaining the current test readiness program.

The Implementation Plan submitted by Department of Energy on July 5, 1994, in response to DNFSB Recommendation 93-6, stated that hydronuclear experiments were a preferred method for maintaining the long-term safety of nuclear testing; however, this method is no longer viable. The Department has determined that the method developed at that time for maintenance of short-term capability will be adequate to cover both short and long-term maintenance capabilities.

The Nevada Test Site has a test readiness program to ensure that the capability to safely conduct nuclear tests is maintained. It is based on the identification of 14 functional areas and 38 key positions which support safe testing. Job and Task Analyses were completed for each of the identified key positions. Subcritical experiments and exercises will be used to help maintain the special skills and competencies of the key positions.

The Nevada Underground Nuclear Testing Order, NV56XE.1, provides guidance on program requirements. An annual Test Readiness Exercise/Activity Plan describes the functional areas and positions to be exercised. Additionally, an annual Test Readiness Exercise/Activity Completion Report describes which functional areas and positions were actually exercised. These two documents are used to plan follow-on exercises. The order also requires an annual review of key positions to determine whether any changes are required. These programs are being implemented; specific information on them has been provided previously under the Recommendation 93-6 Implementation Plan.

If you have any further questions please contact me at (202) 586-2177, or have your staff contact Robin Staffin at (202) 586-7590.

Sincerely,

[Eldon Joersz for]
Victor H. Reis
Assistant Secretary for Defense Programs

cc: Mr. Mark B. Whitaker, Jr.