

STATEMENT OF  
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DEFENSE NUCLEAR FACILITIES SAFETY BOARD  
AT THE PANTEX PUBLIC MEETING  
MARCH 14, 2013

Good afternoon Chairman Winokur and Members of the Board. My name is Daniel Ogg and I am the Board's Group Lead for Nuclear Weapon Programs. My group is responsible for conducting the Board's oversight activities at NNSA's defense nuclear facilities, including those at the Pantex Plant.

As the Chairman discussed in his opening remarks, the three panels of this afternoon's session are intended to discuss the status of the safety culture at the Pantex Plant. A series of recent reviews and events highlight the need for attention in the area of safety culture. These recent activities include reviews and associated letters by the Board and its staff, complaints by employees working at the Pantex Plant, and finally, assessments conducted by B&W Pantex, and DOE's Office of Health, Safety and Security. In my testimony, I will provide a summary of these events in order to establish the basis for this afternoon's discussions.

But, before I discuss those details, I would like to highlight the important role that the Pantex Plant plays in our national security mission. Pantex is the only site in the United States where workers assemble and disassemble complete nuclear weapons. The Plant serves a crucial function in both the maintenance of the enduring stockpile and in meeting America's commitment to dismantle the excess nuclear weapons eliminated by our international agreements. However, at the same time, I note that the weapons-related operations at Pantex are among the most hazardous activities conducted in the weapons complex. Such high-hazard work demands a very high degree of planning and analysis, an extremely robust set of controls, a rigorous set of procedures, and most importantly, a group of highly trained and dedicated workers.

Given the safety significance of the work at Pantex, the Board's technical staff pays close attention to all aspects of operations at the Plant. Among other things, the Board's staff observes day-to-day operations, reviews safety documents in detail, and oversees the NNSA's Nuclear Explosive Safety activities. As I will discuss next, our observations and concerns suggest weaknesses in the safety culture of the Plant. The assessments by the contractor and DOE's Office of Health, Safety and Security identified similar concerns.

In November 2011, after a series of staff reviews, the Board issued a letter to NNSA noting shortcomings in the process of ensuring Nuclear Explosive Safety. Specifically, the Board noted that NNSA managers responsible for Nuclear Explosive Safety were questioning

and downgrading findings from their own experts who were reviewing Nuclear Explosive Safety. The NNSA managers downgraded findings from a pre-start category to a post-start category that requires less attention and less-timely corrective action. These actions reflect an assumption of safety and a willingness to override the opinion of experts. These actions are also counter to a good safety culture, and coming from senior management, they send the wrong message to the workforce—a message that production is more important than safety. Unfortunately, this has been a recurring problem, having been noted by the Board in a letter to NNSA in 2008, and observed again by the Board’s staff in the summer of 2012.

Later in 2011, the Board’s staff learned of a situation where disassembly operations on W76 nuclear warheads proceeded outside of the authorized set of operations. The issue was both informally and formally communicated to contractor management and NNSA line management, but neither party took action until the issue was further elevated to the external Nuclear Explosive Safety organization. The seriousness and safety implications of this situation led the Board to issue a letter to NNSA in March 2012 requesting a report of corrective action. The situation also led the Pantex Site Manager to request that B&W Pantex conduct an internal investigation.

So, in early March 2012, B&W Pantex conducted its internal investigation of the Nuclear Explosive Safety change control process, and the investigation team made several troubling findings. Among those was one drawn from a survey of personnel in the Nuclear Explosive Safety Division that indicated [quote] “8 out of 10 employees believe it is a career limiting move to raise concerns.” [end quote].

Concurrently, in March 2012, two Pantex employees reported instances of perceived retaliation for raising safety concerns. As a result, NNSA requested the DOE Office of Health, Safety and Security to conduct an independent assessment of the safety culture at the Pantex Plant. The results of that assessment will be the subject of the first panel discussion today. While I will leave the full discussion of the results of that assessment to the panelists, I would like to quote a few of the conclusions.

First, the report noted that [quote] “The Pantex Plant has not been successful in understanding the organizational and programmatic behaviors that are necessary for a healthy safety culture” [end quote].

Second, [quote] “there is a strong perception that retaliation exists for ‘rocking the boat.’ The consequences may be subtle ... but they may also include being transferred out of a position or job or termination of employment. The perception has created an environment where the raising of questions or identification of problems is not the consistently accepted way of doing business” [end quote].

And third, [quote] “The belief that the organization places a priority on safety is undermined by employee observations of poor facility conditions, lack of focus on meeting personal needs ... and a sense of cronyism” [end quote].

I believe the observations of the Board’s staff that I have presented here are consistent with the results of the assessments conducted by B&W Pantex and the DOE Office of Health,

Safety and Security. Together, they demonstrate that sound safety culture attributes have not been fully internalized by contractor and NNSA managers at Pantex, nor have they been passed on to the workforce.

Thank you for the opportunity to express the staff's concerns regarding the safety culture at the Pantex Plant. Pending questions from the Board, this concludes my testimony.