

October 2005: Power failure hits CDC germ lab

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Power failure hits CDC germ lab
Outage disables freezers, cuts off security system

By Jim Erickson, Rocky Mountain News
October 13, 2005

A power failure knocked out the security system at a federal germ lab in Fort Collins for 13 hours Monday and disabled freezers housing thousands of vials of plague and other potential bioweapons.

A backup generator kicked on when the power failed.

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But an electrical short prevented the backup power from being routed through the building, said Colorado State University spokesman Brad Bohlander.

As a result, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention laboratory was without power for 13 hours, beginning at 3:07 p.m. Monday, Bohlander said. CSU owns the building and leases it to the government. No germ collections were damaged, the public was not endangered, and no security breach occurred, said CDC spokeswoman Jennifer Morcone.

The Fort Collins CDC lab, which opened in 1967, is known as the Division of Vector-Borne Infectious Diseases.

It houses freeze-dried samples of about 1,000 plague strains, along with smaller collections of two other potential bioweapons, tularemia and Venezuelan equine encephalitis.

West Nile virus and the microbes that cause Lyme disease and yellow fever also are stored at the lab, which is west of downtown Fort Collins on Colorado State's Foothills Campus.

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A new \$80 million CDC lab is being built adjacent to the aging facility. It is scheduled for completion next year.

Sen. Wayne Allard and other members of the Colorado congressional delegation pushed hard to get funding for the new lab. In the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the anthrax–letter incidents that followed, Allard stressed the current lab's security shortcomings.

In a February 2002 letter to the Health and Human Services secretary, Allard said the lab's run–down state constitutes a "bioterrorism security breach."

On Wednesday afternoon, two members of Allard's staff visited the lab for a briefing about Monday's power failure. An incident report is being prepared.

"The senator will take a look at that report, and if there are concerns, he'll address them," said Carolyn Williams, Allard's Colorado press secretary.

"But what we've heard so far is that things were handled very well," she said.

Lab employees were off for the Columbus Day holiday when Monday's power outage occurred. The problem was traced to water that leaked into the room that houses the lab's main electrical system, causing a short that knocked out power, Bohlander said.

Extra security guards were posted during the blackout, which disabled the lab's video surveillance system and the electronic card keys that control access to restricted areas, Morcone said.

Portable generators provided temporary power to the main germ freezers. Dry ice was used in smaller freezers, Bohlander said.

Five CDC employees – including engineers and a security specialist – flew from agency headquarters in Atlanta and worked with the Colorado State team.

In October 2001, investigators from the Office of the Inspector General at the Department of Health and Human Services visited the Fort Collins lab and found several security deficiencies.

A short time later, a new perimeter fence went up, around–the–clock guard patrols were added, and access to the biological agents in the lab's freezers was tightened. Security cameras linking the Fort Collins lab to Atlanta were installed, along with a new computerized card–key system.

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