DOE Appoints New Isotope Production Program Managers

As part of a transition from centralized federal management to a more dispersed, contractor-based management, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has named 2 new directors for its isotope production program. Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) scientist Wolfgang H. Runde, PhD, will serve as national program manager, and Darrell R. Fisher, PhD, of Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (PNNL), has accepted the post of scientific director. Each national laboratory will also have an individual directing that facility's specific isotope production and distribution activities.

The transition is part of an effort to address results of a 2005 audit by the DOE Office of the Inspector General which found that the DOE Isotope Program was not meeting the needs of medical, industrial, and research isotope users. According to Dennis Miotla, DOE deputy assistant secretary for nuclear power deployment, the new plan will put day-to-day management of isotope distribution in the hands of scientists who are more sensitive to the needs of DOE's isotope user community, while "inherently federal functions of program planning, budget and performance assessment" will remain with the DOE. LANL is managed by Los Alamos National Security, LLC, an industry–academic consortium including Bechtel, the University of California, BWX Technologies, and Washington Group International. PNNL is operated by Battelle. "People who would normally go to Washington to talk with the federal employees will now be able to go directly to a lab that produces the isotope they need," Miotla said. "The expectation is that we will get more done. This is typical of the way that other DOE programs are managed."

"As a veteran of isotope production activities at reactors and accelerators, I am pleased to see that DOE has taken steps to respond to the 2005 audit," said Robert Atcher, PhD, SNM vice president-elect and program manager at the LANL Department of Health and Human Services Programs. "Members of the SNM community have worked with the Isotope Production Program through the Government Relations Committee, the Committee on Radiopharmaceuticals, and other task groups to ensure that a reliable supply of radionuclides are available. By making the managers more accessible, DOE should be able to make the program more responsive to the needs of the nuclear medicine community, but it is important to note that staff in DOE headquarters will still be responsible for oversight of the program."

Prior to assuming his new post, Runde was a research scientist working on actinide science and isotope production at the LANL Chemistry Division and in its Isotope Production Facility. He received a PhD in chemistry from the Technical University of Munich (Germany) and was a postdoctoral fellow in the Seaborg Institute at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory before joining the Los Alamos staff in 1996. Runde will be responsible for isotope availability, facility infrastructure, technology development, and coordinating DOE isotope production sites.

Fisher was head of the Radioisotopes Program at PNNL. He received his doctorate in nuclear engineering sciences from the University of Florida (Gainesville). As scientific director of the program, he will be responsible for developing a strategy to integrate isotope development and applications at the 5 national laboratories and other isotope-producing facilities and will interface with government agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security, as well as the community of commercial users.

Miotla noted that the purpose of the change is to provide a more direct interface between isotope users and the DOE isotope production facilities. "Transferring administrative duties to management and operations contractors rather than federal employees will put people who are better able to understand the needs of researchers into the decision-making role," he said "A lot of good research is being done in small labs and by individuals. This new interface will serve them better."

"We welcome the fact that now operational management will be more closely associated with the production sites," Atcher said. "SNM's task is to work with DOE and Congress to develop funding to support research to expand the portfolio of radionuclides available to the research community. In addition, we need to secure funding to reinvigorate training in radiochemistry. Those radiochemists will support both isotope production activity and research in radiopharmaceutical chemistry."