



Would Rick Perry helming Energy Department 'zero out' Jefferson Lab?

By Tamara Dietrich December 17, 2016

President-elect [Donald Trump](#) has made another controversial cabinet choice in naming [Rick Perry](#) to head the U.S. Department of Energy, an agency Perry has said many times should be dismantled.

As former governor of oil-rich Texas, Perry is familiar with extracting energy resources. But it's unclear if he understands that the Energy Department's mission is also about deterring nuclear threats, improving the country's energy infrastructure and supporting the national laboratories that are the backbone of the country's fundamental physics research.

One of those national labs sits on a 206-acre campus in Newport News. Jefferson Laboratory employs about 800 scientists, engineers and staff, while some 1,500 physicists from around the world come to use its unique particle accelerator to unravel the mysteries of the building blocks of matter.

David Armstrong, a physicist at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, has run experiments at Jefferson Lab, as have other scientists at local universities. The prospect of Perry in a cabinet post responsible for overseeing that lab and others, he says, "distresses me considerably."

"His statements about abolishing the Department of Energy show an incredibly superficial understanding of the mission of the Department of Energy," Armstrong said in a phone interview. "It is much broader than he believes."

Joe Arango, DOE's site manager at Jefferson Lab, agrees.

"We have goals and missions not only in science and energy, but nuclear security and environmental management areas as well," Arango said. "So it is a broad spectrum of missions."

The DOE's Office of Science funds much of the fundamental nuclear particle physics conducted in this country.

At Jefferson Lab, the Continuous Electron Beam Accelerator Facility shoots a tightly controlled beam of electrons around a large underground racetrack into target materials to study the gluons and quarks blasted away in the collision. The CEBAF essentially acts as a giant microscope.

"Without the Department of Energy, the U.S. would not have been able to take part in the recent discovery of the Higgs Boson (particle) and the U.S. would not be able to continue to be a world leader in particle physics — the field that leads to a fundamental understanding of the universe around us," Armstrong said.

"And Jefferson Lab," Arango said, "is a world leader as a nuclear physics research facility. ... And the Department of Energy Office of Science is the largest supporter of doing basic research in the physical sciences in the United States."

Jefferson Lab issued a statement Wednesday emphasizing that the facility and its employees serve at the direction of the federal government and the DOE.

"Jefferson Science Associates is committed to effectively managing and operating this world-class research facility for the U.S. Department of Energy and the scientific community dedicated to conducting leading-edge science," spokeswoman Deb Magaldi said in an email.

Jefferson Lab is operated by Jefferson Science Associates LLC under a DOE contract. JSA is a partnership between the Southeastern Universities Research Association Inc. and PAE Applied Technologies.

The lab is finishing up a \$338 million DOE-funded upgrade to its accelerator, doubling its energy capacity and enabling fundamental physics research that can be accomplished nowhere else.

"Jefferson Lab is known internationally as a center of excellence in nuclear physics," Armstrong said. "Hampton Roads is known worldwide because of Jefferson Lab. And Jefferson Lab receives essentially all of its funding from the Department of Energy's Office of Science."

The lab is also in contention with another in New York for an electron-ion collider under the DOE that could bring thousands of jobs and roughly \$1 billion in spending to the area during about a decade of construction. It would also draw thousands of new researchers.

The Office of Science just released the annual performance report cards for its national labs. Jefferson Lab received an A for the quality and productivity of its research and development.

It received A-minuses in research facility construction and operation; project team management; environment, safety and health; and facilities maintenance and infrastructure.

And it earned B-pluses in contractor leadership; business systems; and security and emergency management.

"They had a very good year in performance in fiscal year 2016," Arango said. "And those grades reflect that."

Perry said during a Republican primary debate in 2011 that he wanted to eliminate three cabinet-level departments. The moment became a serious gaffe for his campaign when he named two of them, Education and Commerce, but couldn't recall the third: Energy.

Later, he told reporters he wants to "zero out" the Energy Department.