

Statement by Dr. Raymond L. Orbach
Under Secretary for Science and Director, Office of Science
U.S. Department of Energy
May 22, 2008

Future of the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory (PPPL)

In late 2006, it became clear that National Compact Stellarator Experiment (NCSX) construction project would not be able to meet its approved baseline total project cost of \$102M or its completion date of July 2009. Since then, DOE, Princeton University, and PPPL have worked extensively together to understand the issues and plot a course of action that maximizes the benefits for the scientific community and the taxpayers, and ensures an exciting path for PPPL research well into the future. Following several internal and external reviews over the past 18 months, it has been concluded that the budget increases, schedule delays and continuing uncertainties of the NCSX construction project necessitate its closure, and that PPPL's future as a world-leading center of fusion energy and plasma sciences is more assured by a renewed focus on the successful Spherical Torus confinement concept.

The Office of Science always weighs the scientific benefits to be obtained from facilities against the cost to the taxpayer – in this case the escalating costs and remaining uncertainties make continuation of the construction project untenable. The latest cost estimate is \$170M with an August 2013 scheduled completion. An Office of Science review (April 2008) concluded that the project has not yet met the requirements needed to approve a new baseline cost and schedule. This puts the future of research at PPPL in unnecessary peril, and increases the burden on the DOE fusion energy sciences program. It would require the premature closure of the Spherical Torus experiment (NSTX), a proven, productive, world-leading scientific facility, while creating an uncertain gap in research capabilities at PPPL. This would result in a loss of opportunities for a large number of collaborators in the research community and constrain the ability to start new initiatives during the ITER era.

The highest priority of the U.S. fusion program is participation in the international ITER burning plasma experiment, which is based on the tokamak concept. The Spherical Torus is closely related to the tokamak, and experiments planned for the next several years in the NSTX facility promise many exciting discoveries that should directly impact our ability to understand the new plasma regimes expected in ITER. The Spherical Torus may also prove to be a prototype for the next step for the U.S. domestic fusion program. Proposed upgrades for the Spherical Torus experiment at PPPL can keep this facility at the forefront of fusion science research in the world well into the future. As such, a concentration on the Spherical Torus better positions PPPL to remain a center of excellence for fusion energy and plasma sciences, and thereby compete for new areas of leadership in the future fusion program.

Closure of the Compact Stellarator construction effort will be managed to capture many benefits of the project. PPPL will complete the special modular and toroidal field coils in FY 2008. A modest engineering effort will document the R&D achievements to date, and continue to retire remaining risks of the Compact Stellarator design to allow revisiting this particular design if future developments in the fusion program warrant it. In addition, the U.S. fusion program will increase its investments in theory and smaller focused experiments on stellarator concepts to maintain its interest in future development of these exciting plasma confinement concepts.

We believe this decision is in the best interests of the American fusion program PPPL and Princeton University. Our decision reflects our strong commitment to the future of PPPL as a center of scientific excellence, including the prospect that it will compete successfully for opportunities to extend its work in plasma and fusion science in a number of important and promising new directions.