

REPORT SAID TO DETAIL FBI ERRORS

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The Justice Department inspector general's office has determined that the FBI crime laboratory made "scientifically unsound" conclusions in the Oklahoma City bombing case, finding that supervisors approved lab reports they "cannot support" and that many analyses were "biased in favor of the prosecution."

The still-secret draft report, a copy of which was obtained by the Los Angeles Times, also concludes that FBI lab officials might have erred about the size of the blast and the amount of explosives involved and might not know for certain that ammonium nitrate was used for the main charge that killed 168 people and injured more than 500 others.

The draft report shows that FBI examiners could not identify the triggering device for the truck bomb or how it was detonated April 19, 1995, and it warns that a poorly maintained lab environment could have led to contamination of critical pieces of evidence, such as debris found on the clothing of defendant Timothy J. McVeigh.

If entered into evidence in his trial, set to start March 31, it could provide a measure of doubt about whether bomb residue evidence was properly handled and professionally examined by experts at the Washington lab.

Forensic evidence is an important element of the government's largely circumstantial case against McVeigh.

The FBI has refused to comment until the report is in its final form, which is expected next month. However, FBI Director Louis J. Freeh has told Congress that the bureau does not believe the final report will compromise any pending cases.

Aside from its impact on the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the report raises serious questions about the integrity of FBI supervisors, particularly James T. Thurman, who as chief of the lab's Explosives Unit played a key role in overseeing the forensic evidence.

The Justice Department's investigation began following complaints by Frederic Whitehurst, an FBI chemist and the principal whistle-blower on problems at the lab. While confirming many accusations made by Whitehurst and others, the report also knocks down a number of Whitehurst's charges.

The draft is so tightly held -- and so potentially important -- that U.S. District Judge Richard P. Matsch took the unusual step last month of signing a written order strictly prohibiting either side from discussing the report or providing it to others.