

Inspector Says FBI's Lab Botched Major Work

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FBI crime lab agents produced flawed scientific work or inaccurate testimony in major cases such as the Oklahoma City bombing, the Justice Department inspector general said yesterday.

He recommended discipline for five agents and transfer of the original whistleblower.

But Inspector General Michael Bromwich concluded in his report that agents of the world-renowned crime lab did not commit perjury or fabricate evidence.

Attorney General Janet Reno said the damaging findings already have been raised by defense attorneys in 13 court cases and, "There has been no change in the outcome of the case." Hundreds of prosecutions that used lab evidence remain under review.

Despite "significant instances of testimonial errors, substandard analytical work and deficient practices," the lab is still "capable of performing its mission," Reno said.

Bromwich also criticized lab management and the qualifications of agents in its explosives unit, where he recommended that only scientists be employed. He emphatically endorsed the FBI's current effort to get the lab accredited by outside experts for the first time.

In a typical criticism of work on high-profile cases, Bromwich blasted lab supervisor David Williams' 1993 testimony that a 1,200-pound urea nitrate bomb damaged New York's World Trade Center. FBI chemists found no explosive residues at the site.

Williams' testimony was "inaccurate and incomplete" and appeared to be "tailored to the most incriminating result," Bromwich said.

The FBI accepted nearly all of Bromwich's recommendations. To avoid any conflict, the Justice Department, not the FBI, will rule on Bromwich's proposals to punish agents and transfer the chief whistle-blower, scientist-agent Frederic Whitehurst.

Bromwich said Whitehurst, who triggered the investigation, should be transferred because his "overstated and incendiary" allegations have poisoned his relations with other lab workers.

``The problems and deficiencies that Whitehurst brought to our attention are extremely serious," Bromwich said, ``but they are a far cry from the rampant and intentional wrongdoing alleged by Dr. Whitehurst: . . . Perjury, fabricated evidence, obstructed justice and suppressed exculpatory evidence."

Whitehurst predicted, ``Ultimately, they will put me back into the laboratory."

Bromwich said that since 1989 FBI managers had repeatedly bungled efforts to root out problems in the lab identified by Whitehurst and others. He criticized four retired FBI lab executives for this.

In the Oklahoma bombing, Bromwich said explosives unit supervisor Williams decided a 4,000-pound ammonium nitrate-fuel oil bomb was used, based on the defendants' alleged purchases rather than on scientific evidence.

Bromwich said Williams should be transferred from the lab because he ``repeatedly reached conclusions that incriminated the defendants without a scientific basis."

Federal prosecutors have removed Williams from their list of expert witnesses at the trial of Timothy McVeigh for the Oklahoma bombing. They say another FBI expert can present the explosives evidence, but defense attorney Stephen Jones had indicated he will attack the lab's work.

The report found that explosives unit chief J. Thomas Thurman did not properly review Williams' work and said Williams and Thurman ``merit special censure" for their Oklahoma work.

CNN's coverage includes

"<http://www.cnn.com/US/9704/15/fbi.crime.lab.update/index.html>" sound files from key figures in the story.