

other hand, we are not in a position to assess the importance of the mission or the potential benefit to be derived therefrom, and therefore, we do not recommend against it.²³

The launch was approved by the AEC in December 1967 and, with the recommendation of the Space Council, by the president in January 1968.²⁴ A few days before the launch, Seaborg sent letters to both Webb at NASA and Foster at the Defense Department suggesting "that a joint DoD/NASA/AEC program be initiated to enhance the probabilities of locating and recovering nuclear sources lost in space operations...."²⁵

Linkous described his perspective on the happenings at Vandenberg on 18 May, 1968 when the Nimbus-B launch was aborted some two minutes after liftoff: "We were all at NASA Goddard for the launch and all of a sudden these NASA guys all sat back and took their headsets off."²⁶ Harry Press, then Nimbus Project Director at Goddard, termed it "a frightening experience for all of us. We rewrote the press release right away. We really weren't prepared [with information] for an early abort like that one. The things we really worried about most in those days were blowups on the pad."²⁷ It was discovered later that a human error in setting a guidance gyro had caused Nimbus-B-1 to veer off course shortly after launch. The Range Safety Officer sent a destruct signal at about 120 seconds into the flight, at an altitude of approximately 100,000 feet; thus, the RTG had not left the Earth's atmosphere nor gone through re-entry. The upper portion of the Agena stage (the spacecraft and RTG) was estimated to have fallen "about two to four miles north of San Miguel Island," in the Santa Barbara Channel. The water depth in this area was said to vary from about 300 to 600 feet.²⁸

It was October 1968 before the RTG was recovered from the Santa Barbara Channel. A Navy search had failed to locate the spacecraft. Dix credited Sam McAlees of the Sandia Corporation for an analysis that accurately directed searchers where to look. He also praised the work of George Ogburn, responsible for emergency operations on his own staff, for long hours spent on a choppy channel troubleshooting the retrieval. Dix recalled: "Sandia had a submersible doing something in that area and we asked them: 'Can you go by that point on your way out?' There are terrible currents in that area. But they found the RTG on September 27 and it was recovered two weeks later."²⁹ The