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NFS, NRC to discuss fire safety issue

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NFS
spokesman
Jud Simmons

ERWIN — Nuclear Fuel Services and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission will meet Friday in Atlanta to discuss the company's apparent violations of fire safety regulations in its warehouse.

NRC spokesman Joey Ledford said the federal agency contends NFS has not taken enough steps to protect material stored in the warehouse, where high-enriched uranium is stored, from fire. He also said NFS has too many wooden pallets in the warehouse where, Ledford said, NFS uses propane-powered forklift trucks.

"There is a concern the exhaust from the forklifts could catch the pallets on fire," he said. "We take fire safety very serious."

If a fire occurred at the warehouse, material could leak into the environment, Ledford said. He said the NRC wants to be sure that does not happen. NFS spokesman Jud Simmons said chances of a fire are minimal because the warehouse is a metal building with a concrete floor in which a majority of the stored items are in metal containers.

According to Ledford, the issues the NRC has raised relate to the agency's concerns the past couple of years about the company's safety culture.

"The NRC wants to ensure NFS has a well-instituted safety culture that's a high priority among managers and staff that safety is first and foremost," he said.

Through spokesmen, NFS repeatedly has asserted it is committed to safety. Simmons said Wednesday that the company understands the NRC's concerns.

"Certainly, we're confident we're operating safely in the warehouse," he said. "We're looking forward to attending the conference to discuss the path forward for resolving their concerns."

The NRC called the meeting a predecisional enforcement conference. Ledford said NFS will have a chance to explain what it is doing on the issues the NRC has raised and the federal agency can tell the company why it is concerned. The NRC will take the matter under advisement after the conference.

"The decision to hold the conference does not mean the NRC has determined that a violation occurred or that enforcement action will be taken," Joseph W. Shea, director of the fuel facility inspection division for the NRC, said in a Jan. 12 letter to NFS President

Dave Kudsin. "Because the NRC has not made a final determination in this matter, no notice of violation is being issued for the inspection issues at this time."

Shea said the NRC wants to know how NFS views the safety significance of the apparent violations and their potential for a "high consequence event."

Ledford said the NRC understands NFS plans to install a sprinkler system to protect material in the warehouse from fire.

Simmons said NFS is working on that and also has in place a heat detection system and a fire brigade. But he said the only system on which NFS formally depended when an inspection was made was its combustible control inspection program. He said NFS since has made improvements.

"It's highly unlikely a fire will take place," Simmons said. "The risk is low, but it's something we need to be wary of."

As for the comments from the NRC about the pallets, Simmons said he did not want to address whether NFS agreed, saying that would be a subject of discussion at Friday's get-together. He said NFS has noted the concern about limiting combustibles.

Anyone interested in participating in the 1 p.m. meeting by toll-free audio conference should contact Manuel Crespo of the NRC at (404) 562-4733 or manuel.crespo@nrc.gov.