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NRC planning own evaluation of safety culture at NFS

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ERWIN – The Nuclear Regulatory Commission plans to conduct its own evaluation of the safety culture at Nuclear Fuel Services, the federal agency said in a recent inspection report.

NRC spokesman Roger Hannah said Friday that the exact game plan for the evaluation has not been finalized. He said the evaluation probably would not take place until next year. Meanwhile, standard inspections of the plant would continue, he said.

“We are beginning to look at how we will do that,” Hannah said of the evaluation. “We know we’re going to do something. We’re not sure of the details yet.”

The NRC said in a March 16 letter to NFS President Dave Kudsin that the inspection it conducted from Jan. 26-30 of the company’s Erwin plant was part of the federal agency’s “enhanced oversight” of the company’s implementation of its safety culture improvement plan.

D. Charles Payne, chief of Fuel Facility Inspection Branch 1 for the NRC, said information and observations from this visit “will be considered as (the) NRC further develops the scope and timing of its independent review of (the) safety culture.”

NFS spokesman Jud Simmons deferred comment Friday on the details of the upcoming review to the federal agency but said, “We have been communicating our improvements to them regularly, and we have been pleased with the opportunities we have had to talk to them.”

Safety at NFS has been a subject of much discussion between the company and the NRC in the last few years. The two sides agreed in 2006 that NFS had a deficient safety culture, and the NRC ordered the company to conduct an independent third-party assessment. That assessment happened, and NFS announced in 2008 plans to spend several million dollars on infrastructure and safety improvements.

Hannah said the upcoming evaluation would be a step above the enhanced oversight the NRC has had of NFS and said it would be similar to the independent evaluation the company conducted.

The latest inspection had some good news for NFS, such as a comment the company had “adequately focused” on improving safety margins by zooming in on process equipment reliability. Another positive comment from the NRC was NFS appropriately responded to a lack of timely review submittals.

“We appreciated the NRC’s positive comments about what we are doing well.” Simmons said in an e-mail. “Overall, we agree with the opportunities for improvement that the NRC pointed out during the review, and we have either made changes or are working through them now.”

The NRC said it placed a lot of emphasis in its inspection on the uranium aluminum area, where dissolvers had clogged and caused material to back up into overflow columns.

“These operational upsets had occurred several times over the week prior to the inspection,” the report said. “Each overflow situation placed a significant burden on the operations staff because each of the overflow lines are safety-related equipment.”

The NRC said NFS took an active approach to stay ahead of the curve on this issue, but another incident occurred during the inspection. The federal agency concluded there were problems in company procedures and an alarm, which did not sound initially.

“The inspectors anticipated that the recent spills in the UAL area would have generated a more conservative or questioning attitude with regard to responding to alarms,” the report said. “Instead, the operator rinsing the UAL station assumed the high-high alarm did not apply to him.”

“We recently had three small spills in this operating area,” Simmons said. “None were significant enough to be reportable, no employees were injured or contaminated as a result, and we have made changes to our processes and equipment in an effort to prevent similar spills in the future.”

Hannah said the use of the word spills in the report might have been misleading. He said material simply went into an overflow area and were not spills per se.