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Sun Photo by Bill Jones The Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Victor McCree, standing at left, welcomes audience members to a public meeting Thursday evening at the Unicoi County Courthouse regarding a review of Nuclear Fuel Service, Inc.'s performance. Shown seated at right, are (from left) NFS President Dave Kudsin, NFS Vice President of Operations Tim Lindstrom, NFS Chief Nuclear Safety Officer John Nagy and NFS Safety and VFS Regulatory Vice President Marie Moore.

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Citizens Question

NRC At Meeting;

Activist Overall Had

Samples Tested

BY BILL JONES

STAFF WRITER

ERWIN - The president of Nuclear Fuel Services, Inc., told representatives of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission here Thursday evening that NFS is making progress toward improving its "safety culture."

But during a question-and-answer period that followed the formal meeting, several Erwin and Greene County residents expressed concerns about NFS operations and their potential impact on the environment.

Thursday's meeting, which was held with what appeared to be heavier-than-usual security, was related to an NRC review of NFS operations for the period of July 2008 until April 2009.

"Overall, the Safety Culture Improvement Plan is on track," Dave Kudsin said during a 6:30 p.m. public "licensee performance review" meeting at the Unicoi County Courthouse.

"Most of our performance indicators and metrics are positive," Kudsin. He was taking part in his first such meeting since becoming president of NFS earlier this year.

Kudsin said, "One example is that you're seeing more and more examples of our employees embracing the human performance principles, which is indicated by an increase in the corrective action program input by them."

A slide display during Kudsin's comments to NRC officials indicated that the number of "employee-identified" safety items has risen from 140 in 2005 to 751 this year.

Kudsin also told the NRC that Nuclear Fuel Services still faces challenges.

He said one problem has been coordinating safety culture efforts and communicating them effectively.

But he said NFS officials believe they have resolved that issue through a number of internal changes, including the hiring of a communications manager.

"Despite these challenges, I believe that significant progress has been made," Kudsin said. "We recognize, however, much has yet to be done as we march toward our 2011 goal of industry-recognized excellence."

The Nuclear Fuel Services plant in Erwin is not far from the Nolichucky River, from which Greene Countians get most of their drinking water.

Concerns Raised

After the formal portion of the meeting ended, the NRC's Victor McCree opened the floor for questions from the audience.

Erwin resident Chris Tipton asked NRC officials if a full environmental impact study (EIS) of NFS operations will be required by the NRC before the agency decides if it will renew NFS' "special nuclear materials" license for a requested 40 years.

"Everybody here is worried about what's in the air, what's in the water, what's in the groundwater, what's in our drinking water, what's in our bodies, what's in our genetic problems, what's happening as far as the effluents and the processes that NFS has," she said. "We think we deserve and need an environmental impact study."

The question drew applause from several audience members, although about half the audience was composed of NFS employees.

Park Overall's Tests

Park Overall, a Greene County resident who is a television and movie actress and an environmental activist, told NRC officials that she had paid to have water samples collected from an area along the Nolichucky River near the NFS plant.

She said the samples had been tested by a laboratory and uranium and a alpha

radiation had been detected. She said the samples were "above EPA limits for alpha" radiation.

Overall told NRC officials that she would share the test results with them.

Later, NFS spokeswoman Lauri Turpin maintained that NFS is in compliance with all state and federal environmental regulations.

"The facts are pretty straight forward," Turpin said. "We do environmental releases. All of our environmental releases are monitored. They are permitted. We are within our state and federal licensing requirements. Anything that we do is closely regulated by the NRC and other agencies."

Pete Habighorst, fuel manufacturing branch chief for the NRC, said the NRC must decide whether an environment impact statement (EIS) or a less stringent environmental assessment will be used in evaluating NFS' license-extension request.

Uranium Releases

Also during the meeting, Erwin resident Barbara O'Neal asked whether uranium hexafluoride could be released from the NFS plant as a result of it being processed there.

O'Neal said NRC records show 44 pounds of uranium hexafluoride have been released over the years at NFS.

"Can it happen again?" O'Neal asked.

NRC officials maintained that no uranium hexafluoride would be released because of changes in processing technology.

Victor McCree, deputy regional administrator for the NRC, told audience members that the NRC will host another public meeting in Erwin on Oct. 29 during which questions raised by the public earlier this year, as well as on

Thursday, will be answered.

Plant Operated Safely

"We observed overall that NFS has operated the facility in a manner that adequately protects the health and safety of the workers and of the public," said Joe Shea, director of the NRC's fuel facility inspection division in Atlanta. "We did note that NFS has made continued progress in implementing the safety culture improvement plan."

Implementation of the safety-culture improvement plan was a requirement of a "confirmatory order" that the NRC and NFS signed in 2007 in the wake of a spill of a radioactive liquid inside the NFS plant.

While the NRC complimented NFS' performance in many areas during the nine-month review period, NRC officials said additional management attention was needed in some areas.

"We're glad to see that the NRC found that we are essentially in a state of compliance," Tim Lindstrom, NFS' vice president of operations, told the NRC on Thursday night. "But we're not satisfied with that. We continue to find ways to enhance and improve our safety program."

The NRC's Shea said the regulatory agency will provide "enhanced oversight" at NFS through its core inspection program and additional inspections associated with the safety culture improvement order.

NFS produces fuel for U.S. Navy nuclear-powered submarines and aircraft carriers and also down-blends highly enriched uranium to a low-enriched state suitable for conversion into fuel for nuclear power plants.