

9/8/2009

Story Published on Tuesday, September 8, 2009

Nuclear Regulatory Commission gives NFS good grade but cites needs

ERWIN – The Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s latest review of Nuclear Fuel Services’ performance gave generally good marks but raised a few issues for improvement.

The latest review involves activities at the plant from July 6, 2008, until April 5. Joe Shea, director of the NRC’s fuel facility inspection division, detailed the results in a letter in August to NFS President Dave Kudsin.

“During this review period, the NFS facility was operated in a safe manner that adequately protected the health and safety of the workers and the public,” Shea wrote.

NFS spokeswoman Lauri Turpin said Tuesday that the company would wait to respond until the findings are formally presented on Sept. 24.

The license performance review delves into five areas. One of those is called safeguards, but its results have been classified as official use only because of the “sensitive nature of the information,” Shea wrote.

In three other areas – radiological controls, facility support and special topics (safety licensing and safety culture improvement implementation) – the NRC concluded that there were no specific areas needing improvement.

The NRC had concerns with NFS’ performance on the issue of safety operations.

“With regard to routine site operations, based on our review of the inspection and enforcement record for this period, the NRC identified that additional management attention is needed to ensure that procedures used at the facility are written in a manner to reduce the potential for human error,” Shea wrote.

He said this can be accomplished in pre-job briefings and self and peer checking.

“In addition, the findings indicate that certain procedures do not ensure the necessary reliability and availability of administrative items relied on for safety,” he wrote. “Without appropriate administrative controls, operators are placed in failure-prone situations.”

Specific instances were:

– NFS mistakenly opened a valve that allowed the transfer of solution to the waste treatment facility. In two other cases, operators did not close a valve before and after transfer of materials, resulting in an overflow of material that led to the use of glove box drains.

– The company did not inspect fire dampers relied on for safety for two inspection periods.

– NFS' safety program did not ensure the effectiveness of the combustible control program inspections in one warehouse.

Shea said the NRC recognizes human performance issues are addressed in NFS' Safety Culture Improvement Plan that was developed in the wake of a confirmatory order issued in 2007. The plan was ordered after the company and the NRC agreed in 2006 that the plant had a deficient safety culture.

According to Shea, the NRC made extra inspections to assess how effective NFS has been in implementing its safety plan. These inspections include examination of the Blended Low Enriched Uranium Preparation Facility in January, the security organization in February and the NFS problem identification and resolution program in May.

“The NRC has observed progress in the implementation of your Safety Culture Improvement Plan,” Shea wrote. “The results of the PI&R inspection revealed improvement in certain elements of the NFS corrective action program, including the willingness of employees to identify problems.

“However, the PI&R inspection also showed opportunities to improve certain aspects of your corrective action program, including the consistency and thoroughness of evaluations, the consistency of extent of condition reviews and the effectiveness of corrective actions.”

Shea wrote the NRC intends to continue performing inspections to examine the completion of improvement plan activities, including an additional PI&R inspection in the first quarter of 2010. The federal agency also plans to independently assess “the health of safety culture at the site,” he wrote.

The NRC will have a public meeting at 6:30 p.m. on Sept. 24 at the Unicoi County Courthouse to discuss all but the safeguards component of the license review.