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Firm applies for license change

Erwin company wants to add process line to treat nuke materials from OR

By Andrew Eder
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An East Tennessee nuclear fuel producer is again seeking an amendment to its federal license.

Nuclear Fuel Services of Erwin, Tenn., has asked the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to allow the facility to add a process line that will treat small amounts of nuclear material from U.S. Department of Energy facilities, including Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge.

Nuclear Fuel Services spokesman Tony Treadway said the new process line will take gas from small containers of uranium hexafluoride and convert it into a different chemical form, which will then be processed in the company's "downblending" facility, where highly enriched uranium is converted to a lower enrichment for use as fuel in commercial nuclear reactors.

Treadway said Nuclear Fuel Services operated a similar process from 1962 to 2005, and the renewed interest is related to the federal government's recently announced initiative to scale down its nuclear weapons complex.

"This small process line takes some of those materials ... and now we can purify it and process it through our downblending facilities," said Treadway.

The NRC will complete a safety evaluation report and an environmental assessment before deciding on the proposed amendment. Federal rules allow any person whose interest may be affected by the license change to request a public hearing. For the latest license change, hearing requests must be filed by Feb. 29.

The company received a license amendment in November to increase the amount of highly enriched uranium it could store on-site at the Erwin facility, a move that prompted the Sierra Club to call for a hearing on the NRC's regulation of the private company.

The safety of Nuclear Fuel Services, which also makes fuel for the U.S. Navy's nuclear fleet, has been a focus of activists and residents of the area since a March 6, 2006, spill of highly enriched uranium was made public last year.

The disclosure of that spill in a report to Congress helped reverse a three-year-old policy that had kept most documents related to Nuclear Fuel Services and a similar facility in Virginia hidden from public view. The Sierra Club and five area residents petitioned for a public hearing on the spill, but their requests were denied in December.

According to a recent inspection report from the NRC, Nuclear Fuel Services had an accident Nov. 8 in which a worker, trying to clear a clogged pipe, inadvertently opened a valve and was sprayed with caustic, radioactive fluid.

Treadway said the worker suffered no ill effects from radiation. The worker had a small chemical burn on his neck and was taken to a hospital for treatment, but he reported to work for his shift the next day, Treadway said. An NRC spokesman called the incident "a minor chemical burn problem."

The NRC inspection report documented several other safety violations, including workers not using required protective equipment and "inadequately trained personnel" accidentally setting off an alarm and prompting an evacuation.

Treadway said each of the violations were of the NRC's lowest severity level, and the company's overall number of violations was down in 2007.

"We feel as though we're making quite a bit of progress in enhancing our safety culture," Treadway said.

Business writer Andrew Eder may be reached at 865-342-6318.



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