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NFS officials: Safety culture improving

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ERWIN The general manager of Nuclear Fuel Services on Wednesday stuck to the companys contention that it would not be satisfied simply with regulatory compliance but rather was focused on continuing to improve.

Were not trying to make a safety culture, Tim Lindstrom said. We have a culture. And our culture has been one of regulatory compliance. Our goal is to take steps to strengthen our culture and move to an environment where we are focused on regulatory excellence that all of our programs work to continuously improve and not be satisfied with compliance with the regulations.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, part of a team from that federal agency to meet with company officials, said the bottom line, though, will be how NFS performs in plant inspections.

Company officials met with the NRC at the NFS Training Center to discuss where the company stands on its safety culture improvement plan. Three of six members of an oversight panel who were in town also wanted to know about NFS methods and plans for the safety culture.

NFS had to take steps to bolster its safety culture as part of a 2006 alternative dispute resolution with the NRC. In an order entered on Feb. 21, 2007, and released to the public about five months later, the two sides agreed NFS had a deficient safety culture that appeared to contribute to a recurrence of violations of the companys license.

One of the contributing factors to the conclusion was the March 6, 2006, spill of 35 liters of highenriched uranium that caused a processing area to be shut down for six months.

As part of the resolution, NFS had to undertake a safety culture assessment through a third party and a plan of how the company would implement the regulations.

For the past several years, the NRC has been identifying a number of violations and areas needing improvement that, despite NFS best efforts, were not improving perhaps as well as they should, said David Ayers, chairman of the safety panel.

It was apparent to the NRC at one point that the traditional enforcement process was not resulting in the longterm improvement that we wanted to see and was not preventing future problems from occurring.

As he listened to NFS plans for improvement, Pete Habighorst, fuel manufacturing branch chief for the NRC, said that the proof would be in the pudding of inspections. He clarified his point in an interview afterward.

What I mean by that is we have a formal assessment process, he said, referring to the license performance review that determines how frequently the federal government will inspect and the time periods. That is our fundamental way of assessing their performance. And so when there are issues that come from this

that we can verify and validate, well do that and itll be incorporated into that inspection program and into the licensing performing review.

Lindstrom said early reports on the NFS safety plan are the companys actions appear to be effective. He cited as a more recent example NFS most recent license performance review in which the NRC noted that the company had improved in its procedural compliance. That review will be discussed at another meeting between NFS and the NRC starting at 7 tonight.

Positive developments Lindstrom outlined were creating a job for a chief nuclear safety officer that has been placed at the vice presidential level within NFS. Other examples are the companys Occupational Safety and Health Administration reportable rates and NRC violation rates have decreased. The backlog of overdue corrective measures also has fallen.

Lindstrom also said United Steelworkers Local 9-677, the union for the companys hourly workers, has helped. Plus, the number of employee-identified safety items increase.

Fundamentally, we have changed the way we manage the company, Lindstrom said. That is not only in the safety culture and operations but the whole way we run the business. We dont manage the company any differently in a safety state or a regulatory state than we do in a business or operations stage.



Jim Wozniak/Johnson City Press

**David Ayers of the
Nuclear Regulatory
Commission makes a point
at a meeting with Nuclear
Fuel Services Wednesday.**