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Plant Operating Safely, Regulatory Commission Says At Hearing In Erwin

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ERWIN -- Several local residents took advantage on Thursday evening of an opportunity to voice their concerns about a proposed new highly enriched uranium processing line at the Nuclear Fuel Services, Inc., plant here. The opportunity came at the close of a meeting hosted by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to discuss NFS' performance during the first half of 2008.

During the meeting, Joseph Shea, the NRC's Region II director of fuel facility inspections, said the NRC had found that NFS had operated its Erwin plant safely between January and July.

He also said an NRC review of NFS operations had found no significant problems with any of the five operational areas the NRC monitors.

The NFS plant is considered a "fuel facility" because it produces fuel for U.S. Navy submarines and aircraft carriers, officials said.

But the Erwin facility also is involved in commercial down-blending of highly enriched uranium to a low-enriched state that is suitable for conversion into fuel for commercial nuclear power plants.

The reviewed operational areas include: safety operations, safeguards, radiological controls, facility support and licensing, according to an NRC news release issued last week.

Before Thursday's meeting, NFS spokesman Tony Treadway said that in the past NFS had "had some issues" related to procedural compliance and safety related matters.

"Of course, we've launched a campaign called 'Safety Strong' to build a greater focus toward safety and procedural compliance," Treadway said. "This reporting period shows we're making progress. They (the NRC) found no significant areas needing improvement. They found some areas that we need to pay attention to."

Shea also said that the next licensee performance review period will be nine months in length, rather than six months, as was the last review period.

Normally, he said, the NRC extends review periods for the nuclear industries it regulates to one year after no significant problems are found during the most recent review.

But because NFS is in the midst of implementing a "safety culture" improvement program and the NRC anticipates a series of inspections to check that program's progress, the next review period will be nine months, Shea said.

He had said during the meeting that public trust was important to the NRC. He noted that a recent letter from local residents to the NRC had indicated that trust of the federal regulatory agency, on the part of at least some residents, was not as high as it might be in Erwin.

His comment about possible lack of trust seemed to be borne out during a question-and-answer period that followed Thursday's formal meeting.

Questions About 'UF6'

Most of the questions focused on NFS's efforts to obtain an amendment from the NRC to its special nuclear materials license that will allow NFS to begin converting some 700 kilograms (about 1,500 pounds) of highly enriched uranium hexafluoride (also called UF6) gas into a form suitable for conversion to commercial nuclear power plant fuel.

During the formal portion of the meeting, NFS Executive Vice President and General Manager Timothy Lindstrom said a new CD (commercial development) facility at the plant is nearly complete and that NFS is awaiting approval of its license amendment request by the NRC.

"We will not import material into that facility until late March or early April," Lindstrom said. "It will undergo a six month, post construction period where we will conduct extensive safety reviews, review the drawings, review procedures and train the operators."

He said that the actual processing of the uranium hexafluoride is expected to take only about three months.

During the later question-and-answer period, Lindstrom said NFS has stored at its plant about 10 four-foot-tall containers of uranium hexafluoride and about 100 two-foot-tall containers of the highly-enriched radioactive gas.

NFS spokesman Tony Treadway said after the meeting that the uranium hexafluoride is stored in "vaults" at the NFS plants.

Treadway also said that NFS has a long history of dealing with uranium hexafluoride in other operations at its Erwin plant. "This isn't a new substance for us," he said.

Worst-Case Scenario

The first question by an audience member about the proposed UF6 processing came from Janice Barnett, a Unicoi town resident who asked NRC representatives to describe "the worst thing that could happen" in terms of public safety related to processing of uranium hexafluoride.

After the meeting, Barnett said she is not "anti-NFS."

"I just want the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to do their job," she said.

Kevin Ramsey, a NRC staffer who indicated that he is responsible for monitoring the NFS commercial development line project, said the worst-case scenario would be a release of uranium hexafluoride gas to the atmosphere.

Ramsey said the UF₆ gas reacts with water vapor to form an acid that can burn the skin and lungs if breathed. Could there be a "big explosion" that could release the UF₆ gas, Barnett asked. NRC officials downplayed the possibility of an explosion and said the quantities of uranium hexafluoride proposed to be processed in the new NFS commercial development facility are so small as to not pose a serious hazard. The NRC's Manuel Crespo said there could not be an explosion. "The quantities (of uranium hexafluoride) they're dealing with here are so small you would be lucky if it were to get outside the building," Crespo said. "The chances of it getting out are near impossible. There's not enough material for it to possibly escape."

After the meeting, NFS spokesman Treadway said uranium hexafluoride is not explosive. He noted that an accident at another nuclear facility in 1986 that involved release of uranium hexafluoride resulted from a storage container that had had "too much pressure" that caused it to rupture. During the meeting, the NRC's Shea said the risk of a leak of uranium hexafluoride gas is low. Questioners said the 1986 uranium hexafluoride accident killed one worker and injured 42 people. Michael Weber, director of the NRC's office of Nuclear material Safety and Safeguards in Rockville, Md., said that NRC officials had visited the proposed NFS uranium hexafluoride processing facility on Thursday. He pledged that unless the NRC is convinced that the facility can be operated "safely and securely," the regulatory agency will not grant a license amendment to allow NFS to operate the facility.

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