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In two public meetings, NFS insist plant is safe

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A Nuclear Fuel Services executive reported last week to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission that the company has taken steps to strengthen its safety culture.

NFS General Manager Tim Lindstrom spoke on behalf of his company during during a public meeting Oct. 1, between NFS and the NRC.

“We’re not trying to make a safety culture,” 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.”

Even though the NRC panel supported the safety culture plans of NFS, the three NRC members present said everything depends on how NFS performs in later inspections.

Due to a dispute over reoccurring safety issues in 2006 and 2007, NFS created a safety culture improvement plan. Safety became a major issue at NFS, especially following a spill of 35 liters of highly enriched uranium at the facility in March 2006.

On Feb. 21, 2007, the two sides said NFS had a deficient safety culture and since then, NFS officials say they have worked to improve the facilities. Last week’s meeting was used to discuss the program; including what NFS has done and what needs to improve to comply with NRC inspections.

“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 NRC safety panel.

Ayres presented NFS with 27 questions regarding the safety culture program on Sept. 9, 2008. Those questions referred to the Safety Culture Board of Advisors, or SCUBA, which oversees a broad base of safety issues at NFS.

NFS provided draft answers to those questions at the meeting.

In a response to a question from NRC panel member Pete Habighorst, Lindstrom said, “NFS is moving in the right direction.”

Lindstrom mentioned violation reports have “calmed down” from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the NRC, self-assessments within NFS and other third party investigations.

During a question-and-answer session following the business portion of the meeting, Ayres said that the NFS plan covers a four-year period. “But that’s not the whole picture.” he said. “Safety culture is something you need to do beyond setting up the program.”

He then held up a copy of a 144-page independent assessment and said, “It does not paint a pretty picture. but when NFS hired these experts, they said they wanted to be compared to the best in the industry.”

In another question-and-answer session held Thursday evening, residents were able to speak with NRC representatives directly and ask about the company’s safety culture.

“In reviewing results, we concluded that NFS operates in a safe manner,” NRC Director Joe Shea said. “Overall, no areas needed improvement.”

But those results were not enough of an assurance for some members of the community.

Erwin resident Barbara O’Neal expressed her concerns of the initial safety of the facility as a whole.

“Does NRC take into consideration the safety culture status of a facility before they approve a license?” O’Neal asked.

Her answer came swiftly from NRC representative Michael Weber, who explained all the aspects of determining a safe facility.

“If we don’t have confidence that the facility will operate safely and securely, we would shut them down,” Weber said.

Weber continued by describing the aspects of a safe plant, but O’Neal still had her doubts.

“There has been a canister of Uranium Hydroxoflouride stored here since 1999, is that safe?”

Weber was quick to assure O’Neal there was no real danger.

“While it’s not ideal, it can be stored safely,” he said.

Lindstrom was happy with the results, but he assured the public that compliance with safety mandates was not enough.

“We certainly appreciate the assesment,” Lindstrom said, “but as I have said before, we are not satisfied with compliance. We want excellence.”

Linstrom detailed to the public the new expectations and policies of the plant.

“We have instituted a daily review plan,” Lindstrom said. “The plan will help to correct errors throughout the plant.

“We also have a record of the lowest employee dose of radioactivity,” he said. “We are not satisfied with that either, we strive for excellence.”