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Procedural violations up at NFS, NRC says - Declining regulatory performance,' need for management oversight cited in review.

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ERWIN — Procedural violations at Nuclear Fuel Services are on the upswing and are a sign of “declining regulatory performance” in that facet of the company’s operations, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission said in a recent letter.

Acknowledging where NFS fell short, spokesman Tony Treadway saw a positive side in the federal agency’s latest license performance review. He said the company is showing “continuous improvement” in most elements of its operation.

The review covers the plant’s activities from July 29 until Dec. 31. It showed there were no areas needing improvement in three of the five categories examined — safety operations, radiological controls and safeguards. But the review pointed to multiple areas in which management oversight was needed in facility support and licensing activities.

“During this review period, NFS continued to maintain safety and security for its workers and the public,” Victor McCree, acting NRC regional administrator, said in a letter to President and Chief Executive Officer Dwight Ferguson. “However, the NRC noted an upward trend in the number of procedural violations identified during this review period. This increase in violations appears to be an indicator of declining regulatory performance in this area.” According to the LPR, problems in facility support included not having formal approval from the nuclear criticality safety group with pipe sections, not implementing criticality alarm response procedures after a false alarm and an operator receiving a slight chemical exposure. There were three cases of not following special work permits by not using appropriate personnel protective equipment.

“This area for improvement is particularly noteworthy, as it is a longstanding area needing attention at NFS, as indicated by two of the previous LPRs,” McCree’s letter said. “At least one of these procedure violations involve failure to adhere to procedures implemented as a corrective action following the (March 6, 2006 incident) involving the spill of (35 liters) of high-enriched uranium. “In light of NFS’ plan for significant expansion of the Blended Low Enriched Uranium facility in 2008, this area for improvement will continue to be a focus of NRC oversight.”

NFS also needed to improve oversight in the planning and quality of license amendment proposals, according to the LPR.

“Several recent licensing requests have not adequately supported the licensee’s desired operational needs,” the document said. “Ineffective planning and quality resulted in documents that required multiple changes before providing sufficient information to support NRC licensing activities.”

One example was NFS’ request in 2007 to increase the amount of highly enriched uranium it can possess in the plant. The NRC approved that request in November, but the Sierra Club’s Radiation Committee has asked for a hearing.

Other cases where requests were insufficiently presented were three revisions of the Fundamental Nuclear Material Control Plan and a “major” revision to the Physical Security Plan, both involving highly enriched uranium, and a request to have a chief nuclear officer.

Treadway said NFS agreed continuous improvement is necessary in facility support and said NFS will continue working closely with the NRC on planning and oversights with license submittals.

“Our commitment to being a world-class nuclear operation is ongoing, and the fact that there were no findings in safety operations, radiological controls or safeguards is proof of that improvement.”

A meeting between the NRC and NFS to discuss the review will be held at the NFS Training Center Feb. 28 at the corner of the Jackson-Love Highway and Carolina Avenue. It is open to the public.