

3/18/2008

U.C. mayor says NRC has different view of NFS figures

- **Mayor says cancer numbers not nearly as extreme as Sierra Club representative suggested.**

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ERWIN — Having checked with the U.S. Energy Department about cancer rates related to Nuclear Fuel Services, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has told Unicoi County's mayor that the numbers are not as severe as a Sierra Club representative presented.

Before a Feb. 28 meeting in which the NRC discussed NFS' performance, Linda Modica, chairwoman of the club's Radiation Committee, disseminated a news release that said one in 71 Erwin residents will die from a latent cancer from the company's conversion of highenriched uranium to a lowenriched form. The statistic came from a report by the National Nuclear Security Administration.

"With a population of approximately, 5,700, NNSA's analysis implies that NFS' blended lowenriched uranium facility will cause 80 latent cancer fatalities per year in Erwin," Modica said in her release.

NFS fired back the next day, saying it had contacted the report's writer and received a different number. Spokesman Tony Treadway said NFS Nuclear Safety Manager Randy Shackelford learned from Hitesh Nigam Sr. that there was a 1 in 85 million chance someone within 50 miles of NFS would contract a latent cancer from the conversion.

Nigam said in an interview that NFS correctly stated his position and said, "The bottom line is there is a very small risk from NFS." In a brief e-mail, John Broehm, NNSA senior adviser for public affairs, said, "The short story is (the) Sierra Club is misleading people about the numbers."

The statement in the report said the off-site population risk "is equivalent to the following increased annual risk of a (latent cancer fatality) occurring in the total off-site population." It then provided figures of 1 in 71 for NFS, 1 in 357 for Y-12 in Oak Ridge, 1 in 4,545 for BWXT and 1 in 416 for Savannah River Site.

In a letter to Unicoi County Mayor Greg Lynch Wednesday, Robert C. Pierson, a director for one of the NRC's divisions, said the federal agency had talked to the DOE, of which the NNSA is a division, and learned the 1 in 71 figure is the risk of a one latent cancer fatality in the whole population within 50 miles of NFS "based on one year of operation."

"This meaning could have been explained better," Pierson said. "We regret the concerns the estimate has caused."

He said NRC staff believe the risk could be more clearly stated: "The exposure of the entire population within 50 miles of NFS to the annual doses estimated by DOE, for a period of 71 years, would be expected to result in no more than one cancer death in the entire population."

According to Pierson, the individual risk translates to a 1 in 85 million chance, which "is consistent with an environmental assessment conducted by NRC in 2002."

Pierson said the NRC will schedule a public meeting in the near future to discuss the issue and answer questions.

"I guess the meat and potatoes of the letter is the fact that they say you have a better chance of getting struck by lightning than you would of getting cancer from anything that they're doing at Nuclear Fuels," Lynch said Monday.

Modica could not be reached for comment. However, in a story published March 2 Modica said that she quoted figures that were in the report and that if she made a mistake, it was unintentional.

Treadway noted that last week's letter confirms what NFS uncovered and comes from a federal agency with experts "who understand what the numbers mean."

"I hope this puts to rest any concerns the public has about that report and the statistic that was misrepresented," he said.

Lynch thought the club should have investigated the figures more thoroughly before publicly discussing them. He said NRC's explanation was good.

"I look forward to the public meeting so that the people who have questions can come forth and question," the mayor said. "Maybe it'll lay some of the fears to rest on this."