

4/15/2008

NFS to expend millions in push to upgrade safety

- **Infrastructure, maintenance improvements planned along with hiring of oversight personnel.**

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ERWIN — Nuclear Fuel Services will pump several million dollars into infrastructure and maintenance improvements as part of its new safety culture plan that will be submitted to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, a company spokesman said.

NFS General Manager Tim Lindstrom and spokesman Tony Treadway said the company is working under the mantra of becoming the best in the nuclear industry in safety and regulatory compliance by 2011.

“While government regulators and industry experts agreed that NFS continued to maintain (a) safe operation at the Erwin plant, I wasn’t satisfied with our performance,” Lindstrom said in a statement. “NFS is not where we want it to be today because our goal is to be the best in the business in safety. Our effort will take time, money and a consistent focus that will succeed.”

The compilation of a safety culture assessment was part of a confirmatory order NFS and the NRC signed in February 2007. That document came after the two sides engaged in alternative dispute resolution in the wake of the federal agency finding of multiple violations of the company’s license in 2005 and 2006, including a spill of 35 liters of highly enriched uranium.

More recently, the NRC determined in a recent license performance review that procedural violations were on the rise, which showed a sign of “decreasing regulatory performance.” But at a meeting in Erwin two weeks ago, Michael D. Tshlitz, a deputy director in the NRC, said highly enriched uranium is being handled carefully at NFS.

As part of the 2007 order, NFS had nine months to complete its safety culture assessment. It formed a Safety Culture Board of Advisers that consisted of at least seven members and submitted its report to NFS about two months ago. NFS is developing an action plan in response to that report that will be presented to the NRC on May 16.

“We hope they will find our action plan satisfactory and one that will take us to the best in the business,” Treadway said.

NFS plans to spend several million dollars — the exact amount is still being calculated — on items such as additional automation that will decrease the potential for human error with equipment, Treadway said. Other elements are the hiring of new training and oversight personnel to ensure safety compliance and improvements to the wastewater treatment and maintenance facilities.

“The SCUBA team said NFS meets minimum NRC requirements” for safety, Treadway said. “But if NFS wants to be the Olympic champion, they need to make significant improvements.”

He said NFS also has sent multiple employees to observe the safety culture in place at other nuclear facilities. Meanwhile, NFS employees get a screensaver message on computers that reminds them about safety, and they are being trained to keep safety in mind before they act, he said.

Treadway said NFS infrastructure improvements and sending employees to other facilities are being initiated prior to NRC approval of the plan because the company is confident the federal agency will support this.

In preparing the report, one of the facilities to which the SCUBA team compared NFS was Westinghouse in Columbia, S.C. The process also included a survey of NFS employees on their views of safety in the plant.