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NFS hopes to become industry model of safety

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Nuclear Fuel Services Inc. announced Monday that it has presented plans to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission for becoming an industry "model" in terms of safety and regulatory compliance.

NFS spokesman Tony Treadway said the action plan was accompanied by a comprehensive analysis of the plant's safety culture in which areas for improvement were identified by an independent group of experts.

According to Treadway, the panel had been asked to conduct the analysis so that NFS could evolve into a world-class safety leader in the nuclear-fuel manufacturing industry.

Development of an enhanced safety culture at the Erwin facility was part of an agreement reached in 2006 between senior management of NFS and the NRC after an increase in NCR-cited violations at the local facility.

The million-dollar SCuBA, or Safety Culture Board of Advisers, analysis was completed over a period of more than a year. Sources of information included employee interviews, questionnaires and on-site observation of work practices.

Among team members were a former NRC official, an employee-concerns executive, and experts in the areas of nuclear power safety cultures, nuclear fuel fabrication, nuclear plant operations, and nuclear industry security.

"The analysis found that the company is operating safely and poses no threat to the public or the environment," Treadway said. "However, it did find that there were significant opportunities to enhance the safety culture if NFS was to match the best of the nuclear power industry."

Treadway said a safety oversight organization has been established at the plant under leadership of John Nagy, NFS vice president and chief nuclear safety officer.

The firm also has hired 12 employees and plans to add another 60 over the next two years in quality assurance, configuration management, industrial safety and engineering support roles, and as radiation technicians, maintenance mechanics and chemical operators.

NFS General Manager Tim Lindstrom said, "We have shifted from a 'compliance only' culture to a nuclear safety culture that emphasizes excellence in nuclear safety operations."

Already in place at the plant are new accountability and safety-performance measurements, along with a program designed to enhance human performance.

Budgeted capital improvements include process and support equipment, safety systems, new roofs and heating, ventilation and air conditioning.

“The company already is experiencing measurable improvements in enhanced safety culture,” Treadway said. “Communications between workers and management in both directions regarding priorities and concerns has improved significantly, and employees are proactively involved in early issue identification to improve worker safety.”

NFS has set 2011 as its target year for achieving steps recommended by the SCuBA team, which found that the company needed to make improvements in nine of the 13 areas analyzed.

The team is scheduled to revisit the plant in 2010 to measure its progress.