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CONTACT: Roger Hannah 404-997-4417

Joey Ledford 404-997-4416

NRC Sends Augmented Inspection Team to Westinghouse Nuclear Fuel Plant

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission today is sending an Augmented Inspection Team to the Westinghouse nuclear fuel fabrication plant in Columbia, S.C., to assess the unexpected accumulation of an excessive amount of uranium-bearing material in a plant component.

An Augmented Inspection Team, or an AIT, is formed to review the circumstances surrounding significant events at NRC-licensed facilities. The six-member NRC inspection team includes fuel facility inspectors and a manager from the agency's Region II office in Atlanta as well as specialists from NRC Headquarters in Rockville, Md.

An air scrubber, which removes unwanted material from a number of processes at the plant, was undergoing an annual inspection and cleanout. During that work, an unexpectedly large amount of material was found inside the scrubber. Initially, it was thought the material did not contain a significant amount of uranium, but upon analysis, it was found that the uranium levels were higher in that area than allowed under NRC requirements in the facility license.

There were no actual safety-related consequences as a result of the accumulation of the material, but the potential for such consequences may have existed. The AIT will review the circumstances, identify the cause or causes, and ensure that the company has taken appropriate corrective actions to restore compliance and prevent recurrence in the future.

“This incident did not involve employee contamination or a nuclear criticality, but it shows the need for Westinghouse management to review some aspects of their operation,” said NRC Region II Administrator Cathy Haney. “Our inspection will evaluate these issues thoroughly and ensure they are being properly addressed.”

The team is expected to spend several days at the facility before continuing an in-office review of the findings. An inspection report will be issued within 30 days of the completion of the inspection.