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NRC STAFF PROPOSES \$8,000 FINE AGAINST 3M  
FOR UNATTENDED OPERATION OF IRRADIATOR

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has proposed a \$8,000 fine against the 3M facility in Brookings, South Dakota, for operating an irradiator without an operator in attendance. The company's corporate office is located in St. Paul, Minnesota.

During an inspection in October of last year NRC inspectors noted two instances when an irradiator was left operating for several hours without a trained operator present. NRC requires an irradiator operator to be in attendance when the irradiator is in use. Two additional instances of operator absence for several hours were identified by the company during an audit conducted following NRC's inspection.

The company is licensed to use cobalt-60 in an irradiator for the sterilization of medical products. The irradiator operates as part of an automatic conveyor system.

During two of the operator absences, the conveyor jammed and stopped operating. When the conveyor stopped, the irradiator's cobalt-60 source, as designed, withdrew into its underwater holder, preventing any radiation exposure.

Following the NRC inspection, the company updated its operator training manual, developed additional procedures, committed to add at least two additional operators and instituted a weekly audit conducted by the Radiation Safety Officer.

"The NRC is particularly concerned that your staff either did not know or did not understand the operator attendance requirement, and your audit program failed to identify the problem," said NRC Regional Administrator A. Bill Beach in his letter informing the company of the fine. "Failure to assure operator attendance during irradiator use rendered inoperable the managerial control system designed to ensure safe irradiator operation."

3M has until February 6 to pay the fine or to protest it. If the fine is proposed and subsequently imposed by the NRC staff, the company may request a hearing.

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