

1946

POCKET NUMBER
PROD. & UTIL. FAC. 50-400-2A

Waste Awareness & Reduction Network **NC WARN**

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For Immediate Release
Warren July 13, 2000
490-0747

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SERVED JUL 24 2000

Science Board Repeats Concerns About Nuclear Waste Accidents

Congressman Price Calls on NRC to Fully Review Risks

An advisory board to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has reiterated its concern that the NRC lacks scientific knowledge about the safety of storing "spent" nuclear fuel in cooling pools. The unusual action increases pressure on a separate NRC Licensing Board, which is currently considering whether to conduct hearings regarding an application by Carolina Power & Light to double its storage of spent fuel – or high-level nuclear waste – at its Harris plant in Wake County, North Carolina.

Congressman David Price of North Carolina also has urged the NRC to resolve uncertainties of spent fuel storage. And today, environmental group NC WARN and the CANIT coalition called on the NRC Licensing Board to place its review on hold until after the NRC Advisory Committee on Reactor Safeguards (ACRS) has fully resolved their concerns about the NRC's deficiencies.

In a June 20th letter, the ACRS told the NRC – for a second time – that the federal agency should postpone rulemaking for nuclear waste storage due to serious deficiencies in the understanding of potentially devastating accidents. The letter followed a June meeting between NRC staff and the ACRS to discuss the advisory board's April report criticizing the agency for underestimating accident risks for waste cooling pools. The report stated that the NRC has ignored various causes of potential waste pool fires; relies on "relatively geriatric" scientific information; and has done an **"unacceptable" job in analyzing accidents which are "dominated by sequences involving human errors ..."**

Not persuaded by NRC's explanation at the meeting, the latest ACRS letter repeats that NRC should re-evaluate parts of a draft study of waste accidents. It also points out that, under certain circumstances, **"there is convincing evidence that there may be substantial release of ruthenium,"** a radioactive material whose **"biological consequences are severe."** The ACRS has called NRC back for another meeting in late August to further discuss the shortcomings in NRC's accident analysis.

Environmental group NC WARN pointed out today that the ACRS criticism relates to spent fuel storage at both closed and operating nuclear plants, and that it supports Orange County's legal efforts seeking for the NRC Licensing Board to conduct hearings on CP&L's plan. The County also argues that an Environmental Impact Statement is required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

"The evidence just keeps mounting that CP&L's plan requires a full and open scientific debate and an Environmental Impact Statement," stated Rev. Fran Olson of CANIT (Citizens Against Nuclear Imports to the Triangle). **"This is reasonable, it is fair, and it is what the public deserves, especially given such a large amount of nuclear material planned for one building – with a single cooling system which is also tied to the reactor."** Rep. David Price has called on NRC Chairman Richard Meserve to **"fully consider the implications"** of the NRC draft study of accidents on the CP&L expansion proposal. In a June letter to Meserve, Price noted that the ACRS criticism of NRC, coupled with certain NRC actions on the CP&L project, **"has heightened a conception held by some of my constituents that NRC decision making is unfairly, and unsafely, biased in favor of nuclear power companies."**

Critics of the NRC, including the Union of Concerned Scientists, have long complained that the agency and its Licensing Board are too cozy with the nuclear industry, and almost invariably side with utilities on licensing issues. NC WARN has persistently criticized NRC's actions on the Harris expansion and the federal rules which have allowed CP&L and NRC lawyers to successfully thwart Orange County's efforts to obtain scientific hearings before the Licensing Board.

At such hearings, CP&L's technical people would be required to address the safety concerns of Orange's experts – under oath – in an open, formal setting. The review process has so far only provided for written arguments which are privately reviewed by the NRC staff and the Licensing Board.

Orange consultant Dr. Gordon Thompson has calculated that spent fuel pools contain such large inventories of long-lived radioactive material, an accident which released even a substantial fraction of the waste at Harris **"could considerably exceed the consequences from the 1986 Chernobyl accident."** The ACRS criticism of the NRC is particularly noteworthy because it refutes a key claim by CP&L and NRC staff, that what the industry calls "older and colder" waste would not catch fire when exposed to air – as waste up to five years old certainly would. Thompson believes an alternate storage plan would greatly reduce the potential for a major accident; dry cask storage of spent fuel is a proven method in use by many utilities, including CP&L at its Robinson Plant in South Carolina.

NC WARN points out that, in the mid-sixties, the NRC did not heed a warning by the ACRS regarding accident risks at nuclear plants. This preceded a very serious core meltdown of the Fermi reactor near Detroit in 1966. NC WARN Director Jim Warren stated that **"at Fermi, only sheer luck averted a massive explosion which could have killed thousands of people. We**

would hope the NRC will start paying more attention to its own science advisors, especially since spent fuel accidents could be far worse than any reactor accident."

NOTE: Contact NC WARN for copies of the letters from Rep. Price and the ACRS.

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Docket No. 50-400-LA
LIMITED APPEARANCE STATEMENT
OF NC WARN

Adria T. Byrdson
Office of the Secretary of the Commission

Dated at Rockville, Maryland,
this 24th day of July 2000