



NRC NEWS

U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

Office of Public Affairs

Telephone: 301/415-8200

Washington, DC 20555-001

E-mail: opa@nrc.gov

Web Site: <http://www.nrc.gov/OPA>

No. 01-013

February 8, 2001

NRC REFINES PROCESS FOR ASSESSING RESULTS OF SECURITY EXERCISES AT NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS

The Commission has approved interim guidance to be used by the staff of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission in assessing the results of security exercises at nuclear power plants.

NRC regulations ensure that commercial nuclear power plants are among the most secure industrial facilities in the United States with a capable and well-trained security force to serve as a deterrent to any potential adversary. The guidance will not change this requirement. As part of NRC's inspection effort to verify compliance with these regulations, mock terrorists engage in a force-on-force exercise which tests the security of nuclear power plants. But some problems have arisen in assessing the significance of security exercise findings under the agency's revised Reactor Oversight Process (ROP) since its initial implementation in April 2000.

Under the ROP, a Significance Determination Process is used which incorporates risk-informed insights to assess the safety significance of inspection findings. When applied to security exercises, the significance determination process over-estimated the significance of findings, leading to a higher level of NRC response than was warranted. The interim guidance approved by the Commission classifies findings from force-on-force exercises so that the level of significance more appropriately reflects the associated increase in risk to public health and safety.

Although the general nature of the threat nuclear power plants must protect themselves against is defined in NRC regulations, some of the provisions are difficult to interpret and the details and expectations have not always been communicated clearly and consistently by NRC to licensees participating in security exercises. As a result, some inconsistencies have existed. Progress has been made by NRC in addressing these issues. But, the Commission has directed the staff not to issue violations arising from force-on-force findings at this time. The Commission expects, however, that deficiencies identified during force-on-force exercises will be promptly addressed by the licensees' corrective action programs. In addition, licensees will remain subject to enforcement action if they fail to comply with their security plan commitments.

The staff will continue to work with stakeholders in an open forum to resolve remaining challenges involved in evaluating security plan exercises and clarifying and revising NRC regulations through the rulemaking process.

The Commission continues to believe that a strong safeguards and security program is a central and important obligation of NRC licensees. During this interim period NRC licensees will be expected to continue to meet the regulatory requirements for the physical protection of nuclear power plants and to take corrective action for deficiencies identified during exercises. Typically, corrective actions are taken by licensees before NRC inspectors leave the facilities at the conclusion of a security exercise.

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