



NRC NEWS

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NRC DETERMINES INSPECTION FINDING FOR VERMONT YANKEE NUCLEAR PLANT TO BE OF SUBSTANTIAL SAFETY SIGNIFICANCE

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has determined that an inspection finding for the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant pertaining to the facility's security program should be characterized as "yellow," meaning it is an issue of substantial importance to safety. Additional NRC inspections will be conducted at the plant as a result of the finding. The plant, located in Vernon, Vt., is operated by the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corp.

The finding is based on the NRC's assessment of a security exercise conducted at the plant between Aug. 20 and 23 of last year. During the exercise, known as an Operational Safeguards Response Evaluation (OSRE), an NRC team evaluated Vermont Yankee's security program through table-top drills, assessed tactical training and firearms proficiency, and conducted four challenging force-on-force drills designed to identify potential vulnerabilities, as well as areas where the program could be strengthened.

The NRC team determined through the table-top drills that there were potential vulnerabilities in the security program's response strategy. The finding was subsequently confirmed by the results of two of the force-on-force drills. It has been determined by the NRC staff to be "yellow" because the weaknesses were generally predictable, repeatable and indicative of a broad programmatic problem.

Because plant safeguards information is involved, the exact nature of the weaknesses identified cannot be provided. However, no weaknesses were of such significance that they could not be dealt with promptly through compensatory measures. Vermont Yankee did establish such measures immediately, and longer-term improvements, including improved internal and external strategies and organizational improvements, were also begun. The NRC inspectors determined that the plant's security program was sound before departing the site. The NRC has also conducted subsequent reviews of the plant's security and found it to be satisfactory.

At a closed regulatory conference on Jan. 18 and in a written evaluation, Vermont Yankee disagreed with the "yellow" finding, contending that the two failures during the force-on-force

exercises were inconclusive because of various artificialities that adversely affected the outcome of both drills. However, after carefully considering the contentions, the NRC has determined that the finding is appropriately characterized within the context of the agency's Reactor Oversight Process.

"In making this determination, we considered the exercise artificialities and controller decisions that occurred during the exercises," NRC Region I Administrator Hubert J. Miller wrote to Vermont Yankee. "... We acknowledge that the exercise artificialities and controller's decisions may have had a degree of influence in the exercises, however, it would not be practical to rerun the exercises to further assess the issues. Nonetheless, the scenarios adequately served to confirm the vulnerabilities (i.e., response strategy deficiencies) identified during the table-top portion of the OSRE."

Vermont Yankee has 10 days to appeal the NRC staff's determination of the significance of the finding.

Under the agency's significance determination process, NRC officials classify certain conditions at nuclear power plants as being one of four colors which delineate increasing levels of safety significance. The indicators begin with "green," which is considered to be the least significant, and progress to "white," "yellow" or "red," which is considered to be the most significant. Any finding of white or above can result in additional inspections.

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