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Corrosion is seen as 'serious accident'
But no ruling yet by full commission

By MICHAEL WOODS
BLADE SCIENCE EDITOR

ROCKVILLE, Md. - The staff of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission has termed the reactor corrosion at FirstEnergy Corp.'s Davis-Besse Nuclear Power Station a "serious accident," although the full commission has not decided on how to categorize the incident, an official said yesterday.

Edwin M. Hackett denied a report that an NRC panel already had concluded that the incident carried only minor safety significance.

Mr. Hackett, a leader of an NRC task force investigating the incident, said no decision has been made in NRC's significance determination process. He made the comments during a task force meeting at NRC headquarters here.

The NRC ranks seriousness of problems at nuclear power plants on a color-coded scale. The scale ranges from green for a finding of minor significance, through white and yellow to red, for a finding of high safety significance.

In a presentation at the task force meeting, David Lochbaum said he learned that NRC already has made a green determination.

Mr. Lochbaum, a nuclear safety engineer with the Union of Concerned Scientists, said the finding usually implies that operators of a nuclear power plant acted in an acceptable fashion.

The Davis-Besse incident involved unprecedented rusting of the protective steel vessel that keeps radiation safely inside the reactor. A years-long leak of acidic water from inside the reactor caused the corrosion.

Despite numerous red flags, the leak went undetected until March, when plant workers discovered that it had eaten a half-foot hole about the size of a football in the carbon steel on the reactor head. Only a thin stainless steel liner kept the radiation inside, preventing a possible catastrophe.

The liner is NRC's basis for the green determination, Mr. Lochbaum said.

FirstEnergy and NRC staff have calculated that the liner was strong enough to continue holding back the more than 2,000 pounds per square inch of pressure inside the reactor.

Mr. Lochbaum said the calculations are irrelevant

The liner, he argued, is not intended as a pressure-tight safety system, and never has been tested as such.

NRC staff gave the Davis-Besse incident a ranking of 3 on the International Nuclear Event Scale, developed by the International Atomic Energy Agency. The scale runs from 0 (no safety significance) to 7 (a major accident).

A 3 signifies a "serious accident." The 1986 accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Ukraine got a 7.

Thomas Koshy, an NRC official familiar with the ranking systems, said INES is based on different considerations than the NRC's own rating scale. He suggested it would be possible for Davis-Besse to receive a rating different than the INES rating.

A green finding, Mr. Lochbaum contended, would severely damage NRC's credibility.

He noted that numerous agencies now investigating FirstEnergy - ranging from NRC's own criminal division to the U.S. Congress - suspect the company's performance was unacceptable.