

## Reflections from the 2003 Regulatory Information Conference by Samuel Collins



Fifteen years ago, the NRC held its first Regulatory Information Conference (RIC). What started as a relatively small gathering of NRC staff and members of the nuclear industry, has grown into a much-anticipated event that attracts over one thousand participants from 19 countries.

This year, the RIC was held on April 16 - 18. The conference is an annual forum for the NRC, its regulated utilities, and other interested stakeholders to meet and discuss regulatory trends and safety initiatives. Some of the topics discussed in the sessions include: security issues; the reactor oversight process; license renewal and power uprates; safety management; spent fuel storage, transportation, and disposal; advanced reactors; fire protection; international issues; and assessment of operating experience.

The theme for the 2003 RIC was “Building on the Past; Moving to the Future.” This theme not only resonated throughout many of the sessions, but it also reflects our regulatory philosophy in that we continuously improve based on our experience and the lessons we learn along the way.



As chairperson of the conference, I had the honor of welcoming Chairman Diaz as he made his public debut as NRC Chairman. As usual, Chairman Diaz gave an entertaining and informative presentation in which he described his philosophy of *realistic conservatism*.

Commissioner Dicus' speech reflected upon how past challenges have strengthened the NRC. “This is likely my last Regulatory Information Conference as an NRC Commissioner” she said. “As I reflect on my NRC career, I am thankful to many people in this room...from the industry executives, to individual NRC staffers, and to NRC's most fervent critics. Thankful,

not because you have made my job easier, but because you have made me better and most importantly, you have made the NRC a stronger organization.”





Commissioner McGaffigan devoted his entire presentation to issues of security at our licensed facilities. He stated that the past year has been marked by significant progress in enhancing the already unmatched security at our nation's civilian nuclear facilities. "No agency of government has worked harder, or achieved more, on homeland security in the past nineteen months than the NRC."

Many speakers focused on improved communications with the public as the most effective way to build on the past and move to the future. Commissioner Merrifield added a little flair to his presentation at the plenary session late Wednesday afternoon with a slide show titled, "What's Communication Got to Do With It?" Describing the importance of effectively communicating, a key point of his speech was the need to focus on enhancing our communication efforts with members of the public. He said, "we work every day in communities across the nation to ensure protection of health, safety, and the environment at nuclear facilities. The American people need to know this." He provided communication examples associated with Davis-Besse, risk-informed regulation, security, and safety culture. He concluded his presentation by recognizing the efforts of the NRC staff by saying, "the NRC's staff is extraordinary. Although its always challenging for a technical agency to effectively communicate in a non-technical way, I believe that there is no other technical agency that has taken this challenge more seriously."



The importance of effective communication and stakeholder involvement, as well as the theme of building on the past, moving to the future, was discussed in many of the individual plenary and breakout sessions. For instance, during the breakout session on the Davis-Besse experience, I shared the stage with other panelists, including Cindi Carpenter, Deputy Director of NRR's Division of Inspection Program Management; Gary Leidich, Executive Vice President of FirstEnergy Nuclear Operating Company (operator of the Davis-Besse plant); and Jere Witt, County Administrator, Ottawa County, Ohio (location of the Davis-Besse plant). Each panelist discussed how their programs were impacted by the year-old finding of reactor vessel head degradation at Davis-Besse. Mr. Witt emphasized the importance of communication and of maintaining an active and open relationship with the local community. He mentioned that our efforts to include the local stakeholders in deliberations of our oversight activities at Davis-Besse have gone a long way toward restoring the local public's confidence in the NRC as an effective regulator.

With representatives from 19 countries participating in the conference, a mutually beneficial exchange of information took place. But, most significantly, this exchange occurred during the two international sessions. The first session, "International Issues and Perspectives," included panelists from nuclear regulatory authorities in Korea, France, Finland, and the United Kingdom. The topics that were discussed included the status of nuclear power plant construction abroad, aging of the existing fleet of nuclear plants, and plant life extension. The second session focused on international experience with Operational Safety Review Team (OSART) missions.



The OSART is a coordinated review of a nuclear plant's performance against a set of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) standards. These reviews are performed by a team of representatives from the regulatory authorities of IAEA member countries (other than the country represented by the host plant). The last OSART that was conducted in the United States was at North Anna in 2000. Each panelist provided an account of the OSART process with the intent of educating the audience, sharing valuable experience, and generating interest among the representatives from U.S. utilities who may volunteer for a possible future domestic mission to be conducted by the end of year 2005.

The growing participation of representatives from the international regulatory community, as well as by U.S. stakeholders, illustrate the importance of establishing and maintaining a healthy international exchange of ideas, views, and operating experience that help shape our policies and programs.

Overall, the conference was viewed as a success by the NRC, stakeholders, and members of the public. It helps to demonstrate that active and open communications with the public allows for a meaningful exchange of information between all stakeholders and promotes a better understanding of regulatory issues. Next year's RIC is scheduled for March 10, 11, and 12 at the Capital Hilton Hotel in downtown Washington, D.C. I look forward to seeing you there.