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NRC SPECIAL INSPECTION TEAM DISPATCHED TO HEMATITE FUEL FABRICATION FACILITY

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has begun a special inspection at the former Hematite Fuel Fabrication Facility in Festus, Missouri, to review the circumstances around an inadvertent shipment of nuclear fuel pellets, which were included in a shipment of metal for reprocessing, from the facility to a recycling facility in Canada. The special inspection will also review the facility's methods for controlling and accounting for nuclear material and its shipment verification methods.

The Hematite Fuel Fabrication Facility, owned by Westinghouse Electric Company, has been shut down since June 2001. The facility is currently developing a plan to decommission the site and will submit it to the NRC for review and approval.

Earlier this month, approximately 30,000 used zirconium tubes were shipped for recycling from the Hematite facility to Mississauga Metals and Alloys, Inc., a recycling company located in Brampton, Ontario, Canada. Mississauga Metals and Alloys, Inc. is under the regulation of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission and has proper controls to handle nuclear materials.

All nuclear fuel pellets were supposed to be removed from the zirconium tubes before being shipped from Festus, Missouri, to Ontario, Canada. When the Mississauga Metals and Alloys employees opened one of the shipping boxes, they discovered 36 fuel pellets containing low-enriched uranium in the tubes. The pellets pose no threat to public health and safety.

At the time the fuel pellets were discovered, Mississauga Metals and Alloys had processed about 50 percent of the zirconium tubes. The remaining tubes were placed in a secure location, and further processing was halted.

The report of the inspection will be publically available when it is issued, about 30 days after the inspection is complete. It will be posted on the NRC's web site at: <http://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/adams/web-based.html>. Assistance in using the web reading room is available by calling the NRC Public Document Room at 800-397-4209.

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