



NRC NEWS

UNITED STATES NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION
OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, REGION II

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No. II-03-051

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December 22, 2003

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NRC SENDS INSPECTION TEAM TO ILLINOIS FUEL PLANT TO REVIEW CAUSE OF RADIOACTIVE CHEMICAL RELEASE

Nuclear Regulatory Commission inspectors from the agency's Atlanta regional office have been dispatched to the Honeywell International nuclear fuel processing plant near Metropolis, Illinois, following a gaseous chemical release containing radioactivity early this morning.

Luis A. Reyes, administrator of the NRC's Region II office in Atlanta, said an alarm indicated that there was a release of uranium hexafluoride (UF-6) from a valve in one of the plant's chemical process lines at 2:24 a.m. (cst). The release was terminated at 3:20 a.m. (cst). He said uranium hexafluoride is a potentially hazardous chemical containing low levels of radioactivity. The Honeywell plant takes solid uranium and converts it to a form that can be enriched.

Reyes said initial reports to the NRC indicated that there were no injuries at the plant, but three individuals offsite were taken to the hospital. Two have been released, and the third is being evaluated further prior to release. About 25 people offsite were temporarily evacuated and some 75 persons remained sheltered for a time in their homes.

The company declared a Site Area Emergency at 3:00 a.m. (cst) which was terminated at 6:50 a.m. (cst).

Reyes said the company has determined that probable human error and malfunctioning equipment, not a deliberate act, were the cause of the problem. He said the company has taken air samples to evaluate the amount of material released. The results are expected to be available later today.

The NRC resident inspector from the nearby Paducah, Kentucky, gaseous diffusion plant responded to the Metropolis site and is monitoring recovery operations from the plant's emergency operations center. Two additional NRC inspectors have been dispatched from Atlanta to further evaluate the cause of the event. NRC officials in the agency's emergency response centers in Washington, D.C. and Atlanta are continuing to monitor the company's recovery actions.

Reyes said the plant will not resume operation without NRC concurrence. He said that the plant experienced an offsite chemical release of antimony pentafluoride, not related to the uranium process, on September 12, and gaseous releases of hydrogen fluoride on September 9, and uranium

hexafluoride on September 30, both of which were contained onsite. The NRC performed an onsite inspection following those events and determined, based upon the information presented to the inspectors, that the facility had taken sufficient corrective action.

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