



NRC NEWS

U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

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NRC PLANS FOR POSSIBLE AVIAN FLU PANDEMIC; HOLDS WORKSHOP TO DISCUSS ISSUES

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission has initiated planning to address the potential effects of an avian flu pandemic on its operations and held a workshop yesterday to discuss relevant issues. The NRC is focusing on those critical functions that must be maintained in the event of high absenteeism caused by an avian flu pandemic and the regulatory relief or other actions that may be necessary to maintain the safe operation of nuclear power plants facing similar staff shortages.

Based on federal government planning assumptions, the NRC is determining how to maintain mission-critical functions with absenteeism as high as 40 percent for periods of weeks in the course of a 12- to 18-month period. Other federal government agencies are conducting similar assessments. The nuclear power industry is creating its own business continuity planning and site-specific options, and is discussing its efforts and potential needs with the NRC.

“We need to think creatively and strategically and work together to address this potentially serious issue,” said NRC Commissioner Jeffrey Merrifield, who was asked by Chairman Nils J. Diaz to assume a lead role in the review of the planning effort. “Such a pandemic, should it occur, will be a serious issue for this country, and maintaining the electrical grid while continuing to provide for the safety and security of our communities will be one of the most important tasks this country faces.”

The workshop, closed to the public due to the sensitive nature of much of the discussions, included several panels and drew attendees from other federal agencies, state government and power companies. Discussions included a status of the flu and the availability of vaccines and antiviral medication; steps that might minimize the spread of the disease, including sequestering employees; the status of resident inspectors; the possibility of and process for granting regulatory relief from minimum staffing or work hour requirements; and the possibility of deferring certain activities, such as exercises.

The NRC anticipates continuing discussions with the industry and the possibility of issuing generic guidance or other information in upcoming months.

The agency formed an internal working group in March that is preparing a report, to be finalized in the next few months, outlining what key mission-critical activities the NRC must maintain and how to use teleworking, recent retirees, deferring activities, and other strategies to maintain critical functions. After the report is approved by the Commission, appropriate portions will be made public.

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