

ARKANSAS HEIGHTENED OVERSIGHT CONFERENCE CALL
FEBRUARY 13, 2008

NRC Attendees	Arkansas Attendees
Randy Erickson, RSAO	Donnie Smith, Director
Duncan White, FSME	Renee Mallory, Branch Chief
Kim Lukes, FSME	Bernard Bevill, Section Chief
Dennis Sollenberger, FSME	Steve Mack, Health Physicist
	Katia Gray, Health Physicist
	Layne Pemberton, Health Physicist
	Nicole Sanders, Health Physicist
	Valerie Whitehead, Health Physicist

Summary

On February 13, 2008, NRC hosted the initial Heightened Oversight conference call with the Arkansas Department of Health (the Department) to discuss the status of the Performance Improvement Plan (the Plan), submitted to NRC on January 28, 2008 (ML080510385). The Department submitted the Plan in response to the NRC letter dated December 27, 2007, (ML073450613) that placed the Arkansas Radiation Control Program (the Program) on Heightened Oversight as a result of the Management Review Board on December 4, 2007.

NRC staff concluded that the Program's Plan is a reasonable and realistic approach to completing the two remaining recommendations from the 2006 IMPEP review. NRC staff review concluded that the tasks, assignments, and milestones assigned to each recommendation are achievable. Staff also noted that responsibility for reaching the goals identified in the Plan will require active involvement by Program managers and staff. In a February 25, 2008, letter (ML080500447) to the Deputy Director and Chief Operating Officer for the Department, NRC notified the State that the Plan, as submitted, meets the requirements of the Heightened Oversight Process.

The next Heightened Oversight conference call is scheduled for April 30, 2008.

Discussion

As noted in the list of attendees, Department managers and Program staff participated in the conference call. The Program introduced the Plan by explaining that its development was a team effort by managers and staff and that everyone involved was actively engaged in ensuring that goals and milestones were being met. NRC staff noted that senior Department management responded in a positive manner to a staff request for more direct involvement in the daily operations of the Program. Program staff has increased efforts to help ensure the Program achieves the goals set and reduces the work backlogs that currently exist.

The following are the specific details and accomplishments for each of the recommendations as presented by the Program:

Recommendation 1 - The review team recommends that the State evaluate current and future staffing needs and business processes to develop and implement a strategy that improves the effectiveness and efficiency of the Program to ensure its continued adequacy and compatibility.

Status - The Program acknowledged that the longstanding licensing renewal backlog and the more recent inspection backlog have resulted from its inability to retain trained staff. Low salaries and the lack of a career ladder have long frustrated the staff and often resulted in their leaving the Program after being trained and gaining experience sufficient to obtain employment at other facilities.

By making salaries more competitive and developing a program to facilitate professional growth and upward mobility, the Program believes that staff stabilization can be achieved. With a stable staff, an aggressive training program, and an effective project plan, the Program is certain they will eliminate the licensing and inspection backlogs.

To begin addressing this issue, the Department was able to raise salaries and is currently developing an action plan to address long-term staff retention. Entry level salaries were raised 36.7 percent for the health physics position category within the Program. Individuals who were receiving a salary less than the new starting salary were raised to the new levels. Staff members are also eligible to receive an annual merit increase of 2.5 to 4.5 percent, in addition to cost of living increases. To help recover the increased costs to the Department, a revised fee structure has been developed, and has been submitted to Department management for consideration and approval as part of the 2009 legislative package.

To address long-term staff retention and to provide an avenue for upward mobility, the Director of the Department charged Department managers with developing a Health Physicist certification process. While this program is currently in the conceptual phase, the Department envisions development of training and testing programs that would ultimately result in the health physics staff achieving the status of certified Arkansas Health Physicists. As this certification process develops, it will eventually require approval of the State legislature because it involves changes to the way Health Physicists are compensated. Once in place, management envisions that the certification process will provide an avenue for staff to achieve higher salaries as their knowledge and experience increase.

In the interim, senior staff is actively training junior staff through on-the-job training. At the beginning of each quarter, the Program Manager assigns specific tasks to each staff member. The Program Manager and staff hold bi-weekly meetings to ensure work is progressing. The Program reported that it is meeting its inspection goals. The Program is performing Priority 1, 2, and 3 inspections in accordance with the expectations of the Plan. As of December 31, 2007, the Program had a total of 41 inspections in the inspection backlog, of which 13 were NRC Priority 1, 2, and 3 inspections. The Program reported that at the time of the initial call that they had already completed half of the Priority 1, 2, and 3 inspections for the calendar quarter, in addition to completing a number of Priority 4 and 5 inspections. Some of the backlogged Priority 1, 2, and 3 inspections have also been completed during this calendar quarter.

The Program recently hired an individual with a medical background. This individual's experience was quickly used in training other staff and performing inspections. At the time of the conference call, the program still had one vacancy. In a subsequent telephone call with the

Program Manager, NRC was informed that the final vacancy had been filled. Although one staff member is currently on maternity leave and various others staff members will be unavailable due to upcoming training courses, the Program believes they will still be able to meet the work expectations they set for the staff as identified in the Plan.

First quarter status reports are due to senior management on April 15, 2008. Senior management plans to meet with the staff on April 21, 2008, to discuss their progress and determine if any modifications to their initial expectations need to be made. The results of this meeting will be incorporated into the next update of the Plan and discussed with NRC at the next call.

NRC staff believes that the substantial increase in starting salaries, in addition to the newly developing opportunities for upward mobility, will better position the Program to resolve their longstanding staff retention issues. NRC staff also noted that improved communication between Department managers and staff has led to a closer working relationship.

Recommendation 2 - The review team recommends that Department management develop and implement an action plan to reduce the licensing renewal backlog

Status – Program managers acknowledged that their inability to retain trained staff has directly contributed to a licensing backlog that has existed for several years, improving when staff remained in the Program and regressing after staff departures.

Previously, all staff were trained to perform both licensing and inspection duties; however, in light of staffing shortages and with the need to reduce the licensing backlog, the Program determined that some staff could be better utilized if they were focused only on licensing. While most of the staff will continue to be trained to do both licensing and inspection, certain individuals will be primarily focused on the licensing aspects of the program, at least until the licensing backlog can be reduced. As the licensing backlog reduces, these staff members will be given more inspection training.

The Program is sending staff to the NRC licensing course as openings become available. To help fill an immediate need, the Program has requested assistance from NRC Region IV in providing abbreviated training in the areas of licensing and inspection until they can get the staff into the formal training courses. Region IV staff had previously provided licensing training for one individual and will be providing both licensing and inspection training to another staff member in April 2008.

Until the Program is fully staffed and trained, there are a limited number of individuals qualified to perform license renewals or to provide secondary reviews. Even with a limited number of qualified staff, the Program has set a goal of completing three licensing actions (i.e. initial reviews, secondary reviews, review of request for additional information and issuance of a license) associated with the renewal backlog. The Program met the goal for the month of January 2008.

NRC staff believes that the Program has developed a comprehensive plan to resolve the licensing backlog issue but notes that, with the large number of large number of backlogged

renewals and the limited number of trained staff, it will likely take the Program some time to make significant reductions.

/RA/

Randy Erickson
State Agreements Officer
Region IV

Arkansas Heightened Oversight Summary

bcc: (via ADAMS e-mail distribution):

- Leonard Wert
- Chuck Cain
- Robert Lewis, FSME
- Terry Reis, FSME
- Duncan White, FSME
- Linda McLean
- Randy Erickson
- Aaron McCraw, FSME
- Kim Lukes, FSME
- Dennis Sollenberger, FSME
- William Rautzen, FSME

SUNSI Review Completed: Yes ADAMS: X Yes Initials: RRE
X Publicly Available X Non-Sensitive

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