



NRC NEWS

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No. S-09-015

**“Always Ask the Tough Questions”
Prepared Remarks for
The Honorable Gregory B. Jaczko
Chairman
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
at the
Professional Reactor Operator Society (PROS)
Greenville, SC
June 23, 2009**

Introduction

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you at this year’s Annual PROS Meeting.

Reactor operators are the first line of defense in ensuring the safe operation of nuclear power plants.

Your meeting’s focus this year is on “Delivering World Class Behaviors In a New Era of Nuclear Power.” This is very much in tune with current activities at the NRC.

Safety Culture and Complacency

Licensees must remain focused on the health and safety of the public and the environment when making decisions involving plant maintenance and operations.

Past success should not necessarily be used as a basis for predicting future performance.

The error of assuming that a strong record in the past will guarantee safety in the future is a type of complacency that can be found throughout the history of nuclear power, from Three Mile Island to Davis Besse.

While scrams and other reactor events have been reduced, we have noticed a trend of off-site events becoming more significant. Mainly, these involve transformer problems and grid stability.

I say that because taking a moment to look up from one's day-to-day responsibilities and looking at the larger perspective is one good way of avoiding complacency.

This is something we encourage at the NRC. In fact, helping the staff maintain a proper perspective on the past, the present, and the future is an important priority for the Commission.

When I first joined the agency four years ago, the NRC had a smaller staff. Since then, we have seen a dramatic twenty-five percent growth in the number of employees.

Even more dramatic, almost half of our workforce has been at the agency for five years or less.

Why is that significant? In concrete terms it means that at least half of our staff joined the agency after September 11, 2001.

At least half were not at the NRC when the Davis Besse vessel head cavity was discovered in 2002, let alone during the Three Mile Island accident in 1979. This makes knowledge management tremendously important.

We have excellent and dedicated staff. The people who come to the NRC have top-notch educations, and diverse and impressive professional backgrounds in the private sector, government, and science.

The staff turnovers we have been experiencing present both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity is that we take advantage of these new employees' ability to look at issues from a fresh perspective, to question how and why we do things, and to make us even better. The challenge is making sure all our staff continues to understand the lessons that were learned from the past.

All of that, and more, are essential to avoiding complacency. But it's not enough. We must also avoid taking false comfort in calculations. And we cannot ignore seemingly unlikely events.

This is the real lesson of Davis Besse.

A broader solution to the fight against complacency is to focus on safety culture and I am glad to see the Commission making progress. This is a topic I have been focused on for a long time.

The NRC has a number of initiatives underway to strengthen this area.

We have added attributes of safety culture to the Reactor Oversight Process.

More broadly, we are now developing a policy statement that will lay out our expectations for a healthy safety and security culture for all NRC licensees, contractors, and vendors.

Of course, we recognize that safety culture is not a concern only for licensees. The NRC needs to lead by example, and internalize a strong safety culture within the agency.

Recently, a task force of NRC employees produced a very thorough report with excellent ideas for improving the agency's safety culture.

In addition, the NRC Inspector General is once again conducting a survey of our employees and how they think safety is regarded at the agency. This is an important effort and I look forward to the insights it will provide.

Overall, I am pleased with the progress so far on both the internal and external safety culture initiatives.

These safety culture exercises will come together to give us a definitive understanding of what the NRC should be doing in the area of safety culture oversight.

Let me also mention that last year the NRC issued the new Part 26 rule which also helps address an important element that can undermine safety – fatigue. This rule has a direct impact on you as licensed reactor operators. In revising this rule, we attempted to incorporate scientific insights from research and practices from other relevant communities in defining acceptable work hour guidance.

Conclusion

The challenge I would issue for everyone in this room going forward is to continue to work to minimize risks, never rest on past success, and always be on the lookout for new information and for the unexpected.

To ensure that the use of nuclear materials continues to be safe and secure, always base your decisions on a foundation of sound science and policy, together with a questioning attitude and diversity of thought.

I appreciate the opportunity to be with you today and share a few of my views on preventing complacency and strengthening safety culture.

I look forward to answering any questions you have.