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Division of Preparedness and Response's New Deputy Director for Emergency Preparedness provides Vision

Earlier in my career with the NRC, I worked on Decommissioning projects and had the opportunity to see the regulatory framework for that program grow from having essentially no regulations to a mature and stable program.

In the Emergency Preparedness program, I find that I am coming into a regulatory program that is already mature and stable. As most people are aware, the current Emergency Preparedness regulatory framework was largely developed in the late 70's/early 80's time frame, and has remained largely unchanged since that time. However, the NRC is currently considering changes to the agency's Emergency Preparedness regulations, which if approved by the Commission, would represent the first significant revision to these regulations in nearly 30-years. The agency is also working with FEMA on possibly changing the primary guidance used for both onsite and offsite Emergency Preparedness planning (NUREG-0654/FEMA-REP-1). This also has not been significantly revised in nearly 30-years. In addition to possible changes to its regulatory framework, the agency is considering implications associated with the possible future licensing of reactors based on entirely new concepts. The agency is also exploring the feasibility of using risk-insights in Emergency Preparedness.

Thus, for a regulatory program that has remained fairly stable for a long time, I come on board at a time when there could be significant changes. While most people generally do not like change, I am excited about the possibilities of where this program could be headed and the opportunities to be actively involved in helping actuate this change. My vision is to see an already strong and highly effective program become one that is not only strong and effective, but is also adaptable and flexible. As Charles Kettering is quoted as saying "The world hates change, yet it is the only thing that has brought progress." Therefore, I am very excited about the opportunity to work in Emergency Preparedness at this critical time.

Mark Thaggard, Deputy Director for Emergency Preparedness

NRC Commission Receives Briefing from the NRC Japan Task Force

On June 15, 2011 the NRC Commission was briefed by the NRC Japan Task Force on the status of the NRC response to events in Japan. This was the second of a series of briefings the Commission will receive from the Task Force. The Task Force provided an update on their review of NRC processes and regulations. Executive Director for Operations, R. William Borchardt, and NRC Japan Task Force Team Lead, Dr. Charles Miller, presented the latest information on the situation to the Commissioners, senior managers, and other interested individuals. Currently, the Task Force has not identified any issues that cause the agency doubt in the continued safety and emergency planning of U.S. plants. However, it is likely that recommendations will be made to enhance safety and preparedness.

By direction of the Commission, the agency established the senior-level task force to conduct a methodical and systematic review of NRC processes and regulations to determine whether the agency should make additional improvements to the regulatory system and make recommendations to the Commission for its policy direction. This activity has both near-term and longer-term objectives.

The Task Force will update the Commission again on the near-term review in approximately 30 days, and provide its observations, findings, and recommendations in the form of a written report and briefing at the completion of the near-term effort.

Despite the very high level of support being provided as a result of events in Japan, there has been no reduction in the licensing or oversight function of the NRC as it relates to any of the U.S. licensees.

The agency has created a separate page on its website (http://www.nrc.gov/japan/japan-info.html) devoted to the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami, which includes video clips, press releases, FAQs, diagrams, fact sheets, and numerous links to additional information.

NRC Response to Fukushima Event

On March 11, 2011, when an earthquake and tsunami struck Japan affecting several reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi site, NRC fully activated its 24-hour Operations Center to monitor and analyze events at the nuclear plants in Japan. The NRC moved to support the Japanese government and U.S. Ambassador and took a number of actions to ensure protection of health and safety of the American people. Many NRC employees were requested to provide assistance in various capacities. The stories below are accounts from NRC staff that were involved in efforts conducted at NRC Headquarters, in Japan, and with other federal agencies.

Dispatched to the NRC Operations Center

The morning of Friday, March 11 started differently than usual. A glance at emails revealed breaking news from the Washington Post - a powerful earthquake and tsunami had hit Japan not far from where I previously resided. This news prompted more searches on the subject via Facebook feeds to check on friends and former colleagues still in that area. Upon arriving at work, it was evident the Fukushima plant issues were becoming worse. Two coworkers were dispatched to the Operations Center to help address questions from Government agencies and the public. I was instructed to be on standby, but after receiving a request for information from an investment firm on the issue I took this information to the Operations Center to see if more requests like this were received. Having previous experience as an emergency responder I was requested to stay and provide assistance to one of the teams in the Operations Center.

Normally, the position I filled would take calls from U.S. Government counterparts, but during this event I was also asked to field questions from congressional staffers and the media. I also provided information to a daily document that was provided to previously mentioned inquirers.

I learned valuable lessons from my time involved with this event that will help in future efforts in my current position as an Emergency Preparedness Specialist. The consensus among staff involved in NRC headquarters response efforts is a sense of pride to be an emergency responder to the efforts in Japan.

A Different View of Tokyo

Have you ever been somewhere that normally is very familiar to you, but the next time you arrive, it feels like you're there for the first time? This is the feeling many of the 1st wave of the NRC site team felt when arriving in Tokyo, Japan in March 2011. The streets were empty, and many businesses were closed because of the rolling blackouts. This is a direct contrast to the norm in Tokyo and an effect of the earthquake and Tsunami that devastated the northeastern seaboard of the country 5 days prior to the site team's arrival.

During the first few weeks, the NRC site team worked with counterparts in the Japanese Government and TEPCO to obtain the best available information on plant conditions. The information obtained was shared with a diverse collection of Government and industry experts in the U.S. to obtain the best consensus suggestions, which were reviewed and refined with Japanese counterparts.

In addition, the NRC worked with the U.S. Agency for International Development and a wide range of Individuals from throughout the Federal family and the U.S. nuclear industry, who contributed a diverse array of knowledge and services to help stabilize the plant, protect the workers and the public, and monitor the environmental impacts of the accident. It was a privilege to work with the Japanese counterparts and American colleagues in this important endeavor.

A rotating team of NRC staff remains in Japan providing technical expertise and support to the U.S. Government in Japan, the Japanese Government, and TEPCO.

Interagency Coordination

In the days immediately following the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, the NRC proactively dispatched members of its Interagency Response Team to other Federal departments and agencies to act as liaisons for the response efforts. One agency that requested an NRC liaison was the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Part of the function of this Department of State agency is providing disaster relief in foreign countries. Since their experience regarding a nuclear power plant emergency was limited, their Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance contacted us. USAID's response consisted of a U.S. based Response Management Team (RMT) and a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) temporarily located in Japan. The RMT provided administrative, communication, political, and technical support in its Operations Center in the Ronald Reagan building in downtown Washington, D.C. The primary role of the DART was boots-on-the-ground coordination of relief efforts, including integration into the US embassy, urban search and rescue, and movement of American provided assets and supplies.

The NRC liaisons integrated into the RMT along with other liaisons from federal agencies such as Department of Defense, Department of Energy, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the Center for Disease Control. For almost two months, NRC liaisons staffed 12 hour shifts at the RMT to provide situational awareness on the NRC's understanding of the events at the Fukushima plant. NRC liaisons also coordinated assistance being provided from the private sector. This task normally covers humanitarian aid supplies, such as food, water, or blankets, but because of the nature of the response, we were able to assist in supplying assets directly related to the emergency at the Fukushima plant.

This international response was uncharted territory for many responders, and integration into an agency that many knew little about, certainly had its challenges. However, the dedication of the NRC responders at Headquarters and in Japan resulted in an impressive display of interagency coordination and cooperation.

For More Information on Fukushima

The NRC has created a separate page on its public website (http://www.nrc.gov/japan/japan-info.html) devoted to the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami, which includes video clips, press releases, FAQs, diagrams, fact sheets, and links to additional information.