

No: 14-017

March 11, 2014

CONTACT: Eliot Brenner, 301-415-8200

Macfarlane Cites Post-Fukushima Safety Enhancement Progress

Nuclear Regulatory Commission Chairman Allison Macfarlane said Tuesday the agency and the nuclear industry have made substantial progress in work to enhance the safety of U.S. nuclear plants by applying the lessons from the tragic Fukushima reactor accident three years ago.

Speaking on the third anniversary of the accident in which the multi-unit plant was hit first by a 9.0 earthquake and then by a massive tsunami, Macfarlane said in her prepared remarks: “When it comes to post-Fukushima actions, the NRC and industry can both be proud of the hard work we’ve done to date, to learn from this tragedy and take strategic actions to enhance safety.

“The NRC staff’s work has focused on better positioning the reactor fleet to respond to future ‘unknown unknowns.’ We’ve learned and accomplished a great deal,” Macfarlane added. “There are some who may feel we’ve done too much, and some who’d argue we haven’t done enough. But, as the most safety-significant changes draw nearer to completion, we’re confident that the requirements we’ve imposed, and the actions industry has taken, supplement an already rigorous oversight program.”

After the accident and following the recommendations of a special task force of NRC experts assembled by the agency, the NRC ordered plants to adopt strategies to mitigate the potential effects of a prolonged loss of offsite power by any natural force – hurricane, flood, tornado, etc. In addition, the NRC directed that the 31 reactors in the United States like those at Fukushima have pressure-relieving vents that can be operated under any accident condition, and ordered additional measures to provide backup cooling water and instrumentation for spent fuel pools.

Macfarlane spoke at the opening of the NRC’s 26th annual Regulatory Information Conference in Rockville, Md. The three-day event drew about 3,000 participants from around the nation and from at least 25 nations and several international organizations. It features speeches and workshops on both policy and technical issues of interest to those in the nuclear field.

The NRC Chairman noted that regulators and the nuclear industry around the world have undertaken complementary efforts to address Fukushima’s lessons.

“Throughout the process, it’s evident that we’re all reaching similar conclusions. Recently, the International Atomic Energy Agency sent an Integrated Regulatory Review Service (IRRS) mission to the NRC to look at how we’ve addressed post-Fukushima actions, and the team strongly endorsed our work. We’ve also held nearly 200 public meetings to solicit input from the public and share NRC and

licensee progress. I view this as a positive example of our agency's efforts to seek and consider feedback on our regulatory programs," said Macfarlane.

On other topics, Macfarlane said:

- Regulatory independence and indigenous regulatory expertise "is a particularly timely consideration for countries considering build-own-operate options for adding nuclear power to their energy portfolio. Regulating from afar presents a host of challenges for even the most competent foreign regulator."
- She will lead the U.S. delegation two weeks from now to the triennial Review meeting of Parties to the Convention on Nuclear Safety in Vienna, Austria, where "we'll be taking a comprehensive look at how the Convention contracting parties have addressed lessons learned from Fukushima."
- The agency's Executive Director for Operations has a five-year review underway to assure there is alignment of mission responsibilities with resource allocation and organizational governance.