

No: 15-040

August 3, 2015

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NRC Launches Special Inspection at Honeywell Metropolis Works

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has launched a special inspection at Honeywell Metropolis Works to assess a uranium hexafluoride leak that occurred during maintenance activities Saturday evening.

The Metropolis, Ill., based uranium conversion facility declared an Alert, the lower of the NRC's two emergency classification levels for fuel facilities, at 5:55 p.m. CDT on Saturday. Honeywell reported that a valve installed during the maintenance activities had begun to leak. No one at the facility was injured and the company reported that no material was released past the site boundary. The leak was reported to have been stopped at 7:48 p.m. CDT.

Honeywell officials indicated that the leak was on the sixth floor of the plant's Feed Materials Building. The facility's mitigation towers, which are large water sprays, were activated, and according to Honeywell, no uranium hexafluoride left the plant site. Monitoring devices located at the site boundaries detected no radiological release beyond regulatory limits.

"This special inspection will analyze all the details of this incident," said Victor McCree, the NRC's Region II administrator. "While no workers were affected and there was no offsite release, any release of uranium hexafluoride is a potentially serious event."

The special inspection will look at the sequence of events leading up to the release, verify that the company followed its procedures for mitigating the release and notifying local and state agencies, verify the initial information indicating that the material remained within the plant boundary, and assess the performance of the plant's detection and sampling systems. The NRC inspectors will also review any corrective actions the company has taken or is planning to take.

A senior fuel facility inspector from the NRC's Region II office in Atlanta arrived at the site Sunday and began gathering information. The inspection is likely to take at least a week. A report documenting the findings will be issued within 45 days after the inspection is completed.