

October 20, 1999

PRELIMINARY NOTIFICATION OF EVENT OR UNUSUAL OCCURRENCE PNO-III-99-047

This preliminary notification constitutes EARLY notice of events of POSSIBLE safety or public interest significance. The information is as initially received without verification or evaluation, and is basically all that is known by Region III staff (Lisle, Illinois) on this date.

Facility
NUCLEAR POWER, INC.
Abb Combustion Engineering
Festus, Missouri
License No: SNM-33

Licensee Emergency Classification
Notification of Unusual Event
Alert
Site Area Emergency
General Emergency
X Not Applicable

Subject: UPDATE: NRC INSPECTORS EVALUATING WORK AT PLANT AMID STRIKE

Two NRC inspectors are continuing to assess safety performance at the plant amid a strike by some plant workers that began at 12:01 a.m. on September 29, 1999. The walkout involves 112 unionized workers at the facility, which employs about 200.

In particular, the NRC inspectors are assessing the training of replacement workers and the conduct of the licensee's operations activities. The licensee is using managers and engineers, including some from another of its facilities, to handle several aspects of the nuclear fuel production process. Thus far, the NRC inspectors have found that the replacement workers have completed the same amount of training as that required of any worker performing those specific tasks, and have satisfactorily passed all examinations.

On Friday, October 15, the replacement workers began operating the oxide plant, where UF6 is converted into UO2 powder. That work was under continuous inspection by the NRC. The oxide plant is expected to operate only until sufficient UO2 powder has been made to handle the current customer fuel order. Training is continuing on other plant processes to make fuel rods from the UO2 powder. However, the radiological and chemical risks involved with these steps is considerably less than those associated with the oxide process.

One minor problem occurred during the initial startup of the oxide plant. While the plant was heating up in preparation to begin operations on October 15, some uranium leaked from a small sensing line that had not been properly tightened. The leak was detected by the licensee's airborne monitoring system and the area was immediately evacuated. Four individuals who were in the area at the time, including an NRC inspector, were checked for contamination. Nasal swabs were analyzed from the individuals, and all showed no detectable uranium. Two lapel air samplers were also analyzed for individuals who had been working this and other jobs throughout the previous 11 hours. The lapel air sampler analyses showed that the exposures were below the licensee's investigation limits, which are less than one percent of the NRC's annual intake limit.

There has been both congressional and media interest in the strike and plant operations.

Contact: DARREL WIEDEMAN
(630)829-9808

MONTE PHILLIPS
(630)829-9806

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