



NRC NEWS

U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

Office of Public Affairs Region III
2443 Warrenville Road
Lisle IL 60532

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Contacts:

Viktoria Mitlyng 630-829-9662

Prema Chandrathil 630-829-9663

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E-Mail: opa3@nrc.gov

Web site: www.nrc.gov

NRC FINDS SHIPMENT OF RADIOACTIVE MATERIALS PROBLEM AT PRAIRIE ISLAND NUCLEAR STATION TO BE OF LOW TO MODERATE SAFETY SIGNIFICANCE

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has determined that two violations of NRC regulations occurred during the packaging and shipping of radioactive material from the Prairie Island Nuclear Plant. These violations were determined to be of low to moderate safety significance. The two-unit plant, located in Welch, Minn., is operated by Northern States Power Company – Minnesota.

On October 29, 2008, a rectangular container with radioactive equipment and tools used for refueling activities was shipped via an exclusive-use transport vehicle from Prairie Island to a Westinghouse field office in Waltz Mill, Penn. Radiological surveys conducted before the shipment left the plant indicated that radiation levels of the package conformed to the NRC and Department of Transportation (DOT) requirements. When the package arrived at Waltz Mill on October 31 radiological surveys showed that the maximum radiation level on the surface of the package, specifically on the bottom, was in excess of federal regulatory limits.

The NRC reviewed the circumstances around the event and concluded that the increased radiation level on the surface of the package was caused by shifting of the radioactive equipment inside the package. They identified two violations of NRC regulations: (1) failure to appropriately prepare the package for shipment and (2) failure to train the workers involved in preparing the package to understand and carry out requirements for shipment of radioactive material.

The incident had no negative impact on members of the public, the driver or other workers.

“Even though no one was harmed in this incident and the bottom of the package with elevated radiation levels would not be easily accessible to the public,” said Region III Administrator Mark Satorius, “the increased risk of radiation exposure needs to be prevented. Companies that ship nuclear material have a great responsibility to make sure that the roads used for transport are safe for members of the public. The NRC will conduct follow-up inspections to make sure the improvements made to the Prairie Island program for shipment of radioactive materials are sustained.”

The utility suspended its radioactive shipments and made changes to improve the radioactive material shipment program. Radioactive shipments were resumed after the program improvements had been implemented.

The NRC uses color-coded inspection findings and performance indicators to assess nuclear plant performance. The colors start with “green” and then increase to “white,” “yellow” or “red,” commensurate with the safety significance of the issues involved.

This issue was determined to be a “white” finding of low to moderate safety significance. Based on the violations of NRC and DOT regulatory requirements, the NRC issued a Notice of Violation to Northern States Power Company – Minnesota for its failure to properly prepare radioactive material for shipment and provide proper training to staff working on these preparations. White findings normally result in additional NRC inspections and meetings with the utility.

The letter notifying Northern States Power Company – Minnesota of the white finding will be available from the NRC's Region III Office of Public Affairs or in the NRC's online document library at: <http://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/adams.html>.

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