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Web Site: www.nrc.gov

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CONTACT: Roger Hannah (404) 562-4417
Joey Ledford (404) 562-4416

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E-mail: OPA2@nrc.gov

NRC AUTHORIZES RESTART OF NFS NAVY FUEL PROCESS LINE

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff is allowing Nuclear Fuel Services to resume operation of one process line at its Erwin, Tenn., facility, where all process lines have been shut down since late December 2009.

The NRC issued a confirmatory action letter on Jan. 7 that was designed to address issues contributing to recent events at the facility. Those events included an Oct. 13 incident that was the subject of an NRC augmented inspection team review. That incident involved workers using nitric acid to dissolve scrap material with small quantities of uranium. It resulted in more heat than expected and the generation of nitrogen compound fumes. Although there were no injuries to employees or environmental releases, heated fumes damaged some pipes and the NRC inspection team identified several safety issues.

In December, NFS agreed that the process lines at the facility would remain out of service until the NRC was satisfied that the safety issues had been addressed. NRC inspectors have completed their review of the items in the confirmatory action letter designated as "Actions Prior to Restart" and determined that NFS can safely resume operation of the Navy Fuel process line. However, the NRC will only authorize resumption of other process lines after the company has achieved a satisfactory level of safety performance in the first line.

"The NRC laid out specific areas where corrective actions were required before restarting any work. After examining what they have done, we believe they have accomplished our requirements to the point a phased restart can commence. Our inspectors will be watching closely as this process unfolds," said NRC Region II Administrator Luis Reyes.

In February, the NRC dispatched a team of six inspectors to NFS to examine the items in the confirmatory action letter. That team, supplemented by additional specialist inspectors, focused on restart items with special attention to the Navy Fuel line.

The inspection team is also evaluating NFS actions to address four concerns discussed in the confirmatory action letter. Those concerns are management oversight of process changes, perceived production pressures, lack of a questioning attitude and poor communications. NRC inspectors will continue to monitor additional commitments in the letter as well as other corrective actions and improvements at NFS.

NFS is required to notify the NRC when the company believes it is ready to restart each successive line. NRC inspectors will conduct readiness inspections and the agency will provide restart authorization only when the NRC staff determines that a line can be restarted safely.

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