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NRC Begins Special Inspection at Columbia Generating Station

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has begun a special inspection at the Columbia Generating Station to review circumstances surrounding the shipment of some low-level waste to a disposal facility. The plant, operated by Energy Northwest, is located near Richland, Wash.

On Nov. 9, workers at the plant shipped a single package of low-level nuclear waste to the U.S. Ecology disposal facility about 10 miles away. When the package containing contaminated filters arrived, workers at the disposal facility noted a discrepancy between the radiation levels specified in the shipping manifest and dose rates they measured on the shipping container. U.S. Ecology personnel measured radiation levels more than seven times higher than documented in the shipping manifest. The package was rejected and taken back to the plant where it is currently being stored.

The following day, the Washington State Department of Health notified Columbia Generating Station officials that their disposal permit privileges to U.S. Ecology were being suspended until a written plan containing corrective actions was approved and an on-site inspection conducted by state officials is completed.

“The purpose of the NRC’s special inspection is to better understand the circumstances surrounding this event, which revealed weaknesses in the licensee’s process for packaging and preparing radioactive waste shipments,” NRC Region IV Administrator Kriss Kennedy said. “While there was no undue risk to the public, had a transportation accident occurred, there was a potential that members of the public could have been exposed to radiation levels in excess of NRC regulatory limits.”

The three-member NRC team will spend about a week on site evaluating the licensee’s cause analysis and the adequacy of corrective actions. An inspection report documenting the team’s findings will be publicly available within 45 days of the end of the inspection.