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DOE Finalizes WIPP Fire Investigation Report

DOE

March 14, 2014

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Washington, DC - Today, the Office of Environmental Management (EM) released the accident investigation report for the underground mine fire involving a salt haul truck at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) near Carlsbad, New Mexico.

"The Accident Investigation Board report is a thorough examination of the events that led to the fire and the response to the fire once it was discovered. Obviously there are many lessons learned that can now be incorporated into the safe future operations of WIPP," said, Matt Moury, EM Deputy Assistant Secretary, Safety, Security, and Quality Programs. "I would like to thank the Board Members for their efforts in drafting a report that will be helpful for the future safe operations of WIPP."

"We welcome the thorough and honest review of the accident investigation team," said, Joe Franco, DOE's Carlsbad Field Office Manager. "We take these findings seriously, and in fact, we are already implementing many of the corrective actions in the report."

During the official investigation, WIPP engaged in its own reviews and has already started implementing changes to ensure better focus on safety. For example, a renewed emphasis is being placed on verifying that all the necessary preventative maintenance has been done on the equipment that will be used and workers are wearing appropriate personal protective equipment. The site is also building extra rigor into the planning and review processes as they prepare to send personnel into the mine to determine the source of the subsequent radiation leak, also the subject of a formal accident investigation.

A formal corrective action plan is being developed to address all of the concerns raised by the report. The corrective actions will also be tracked until completion and their effectiveness will be evaluated.

WIPP Weekly and Daily Updates

City of Carlsbad and DOE

[WEEKLY UPDATES](#)

[DAILY UPDATES](#)

The City of Carlsbad and Department of Energy's Carlsbad Field Office will be co-hosting weekly town hall meetings to discuss recovery efforts following the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant's fire and radiological events in February. The meetings are scheduled for 5:30 p.m. each Thursday in the council chambers of City Hall, 101 N. Halagueno St. Weekly updates on the status of WIPP and recovery efforts will be provided. Meetings will also be available live online at <http://new.livestream.com/rrv/wipptownhall>.

Additionally- daily updates on the WIPP recovery effort are being posted at <http://www.wipp.energy.gov/>

Court Awards Duke Energy, Energy Northwest Spent Fuel Storage Costs

Nuclear Street News

March 13, 2014

[LINK](#)

A federal court this week awarded \$123 million to Duke Energy and Energy Northwest to cover the cost of storing several years worth of spent fuel after the Department of Energy promised to begin moving it to the mothballed Yucca Mountain repository in 1998.

As with several others, the nuclear-plant-owning utilities had won previous lawsuits against the government related to waste storage but were required to seek compensation in six-year intervals. As of April of last year, Congressional offices estimated those claims at \$2.6 billion nationwide, with \$20 billion in liability anticipated by 2020.

On Monday, a U.S. Court of Federal Claims judge awarded Duke Energy \$103.7 million for spent fuel storage at the Harris, Brunswick, Robinson and Crystal River plants from 2006 to 2010. (Those units were previously owned by Carolina Power & Light and Florida Power Corp.)

On Tuesday, another judge awarded \$19.3 million to Energy Northwest for dry storage costs at the Columbia Generating Station in Washington.

Sheheen supports MOX in letter to Obama

Aiken Standard

March 13, 2014

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S.C. Sen. Vincent Sheheen, D-Camden, is the latest advocate to voice his disapproval of the proposal to freeze funding for the MOX facility currently under construction at the Savannah River Site.

President Barack Obama's 2015 fiscal year budget proposal included \$221 million, which would provide funding "to place the Mixed Oxide (MOX) Fuel Fabrication Facility in cold stand-by, while the NNSA (National Nuclear Security Administration) evaluates alternative plutonium disposition options that will achieve a safe and secure solution more quickly and cost-effectively."

In response, Sheheen, who is challenging Gov. Nikki Haley in this year's election, wrote a letter to Obama.

Dated March 12, the letter said the \$221 million is far below what is needed to continue construction and operations at the facility.

"This funding freeze would result in devastating economic impacts on the facility, the local community, as well as the United States' long-term goals in disposing of weapons-grade plutonium. I write to strongly urge you to fully fund this program and maintain support for the hardworking South Carolinians at the SRS and throughout Aiken," he wrote in the letter.

Sheheen also mentioned the workforce statistic of one SRS job equaling 2.5 jobs in Aiken County.

"If enacted, the funding freeze in the proposed FY 2015 budget would force layoffs and hurt hardworking families that have already weathered the economic storm brought about due to the arbitrary cuts required by sequestration and the ongoing dysfunction in Washington, D.C.," he added.

From a nuclear standpoint, Sheheen mentioned the state's belief that it accepted the nuclear materials as part of an agreement with the government to reprocess those materials into useable nuclear fuel.

Abandoning the project could strand the plutonium at SRS for an indefinite amount of time, he said.

"This latest budget proposal, however, raises serious concerns about how long this material would remain at the SRS and what would become of it," Sheheen wrote in the letter.

The MOX project is part of a nonproliferation agreement with Russia to

dispose of 34 metric tons of weapons-grade plutonium. The project has undergone several cost overruns and, most recently, DOE said the project could have a life-cycle cost of up to \$30 billion.

Despite the cost overruns, the South Carolina congressional delegation, Haley and the Aiken state delegation have all had various meetings and spoken out about the issue and are currently looking for ways to preserve the project.

Final load of debris shipped from K-25 Building demolition project

DOE

March 11, 2014

[LINK](#)

On March 11, The final truckload of debris from the K-25 Building demolition project was shipped from East Tennessee Technology Park (ETTP).

The K-25 Building, located at the East Tennessee Technology Park (the former Oak Ridge Gaseous Diffusion Plant), was built in 1943 as part of the Manhattan Project. At that time, K-25 was the world's largest building under one roof. Demolition of the mile-long, U-shaped structure was completed in December 2013. Since then, workers have focused on removing the resulting demolition debris.

Because the final section of the building contained components that were contaminated with a slow-decaying radioactive isotope called technetium-99, workers had to segregate the contaminated components in the field. Workers simplified that process by painting the components with higher contamination bright blue before demolition. These higher-contamination components were shipped off-site for disposal, with the remainder of the debris going to the Environmental Management Waste Management Facility located on DOE's Oak Ridge Reservation.

"As this phase of the project is completed, it's a good time to remember the many people who were responsible constructing, operating, and demolishing this historically significant facility," said Mark Whitney, manager of the Oak Ridge Office of Environmental Management. "The people who built K-25 under intense schedules, the operators who helped our nation succeed through World War II and the Cold War, and the cleanup crews that were able to safely demolish and transport waste from the Department's largest-ever demolition project despite challenges."

The K-25 Building operated until 1964, producing enriched uranium for defense and commercial purposes. During the past decades, as the facility deteriorated, its demolition was considered among the highest priorities for the environmental cleanup program in Oak Ridge.

The K-25 Building demolition project began in December 2008, when Bechtel Jacobs Company LLC started demolition of the west wing. URS|CH2M Oak Ridge LLC (UCOR) took over the project in August 2011 and successfully completed demolition of the building's east wing

and north end. Wastes that have been hauled from the site include 6,000 compressors, 3,000 converters, 187,000 cubic yards of steel, 3,800 miles of electrical conductors, and 1.2 million cubic feet of asbestos insulation. In total, more than 460,000 cubic yards of K-25 waste have been shipped for disposal.

"While this final load of waste was just one in thousands of shipments that have been made, it represents so much more," said Leo Sain, UCOR President and Project Manager. "A great deal of planning and careful execution has allowed us to finish this project safely and ahead of schedule, bringing a successful end to the largest demolition project DOE has ever undertaken."

Although the K-25 Building is gone, the historical significance of the facility and the complex remains. In compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act, in 2012, the Department signed a Memorandum of Agreement with 12 signatory/consulting parties, which plans for ways to commemorate and interpret the historic significance of the site. DOE's Oak Ridge Office of Environmental Management will construct an equipment building that recreates a scale representation of the gaseous diffusion technology. In addition, the site will display equipment, artifacts, oral histories, photographs and videos at a K-25 History Center on site.

Energy Department, Contractor Faulted for Handling of Whistleblowers

Government Executive

March 11, 2014

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Testimony from fired self-described whistleblowers combined with senators' skepticism on Tuesday put the Energy Department on the defensive for its handling of safety concerns raised at its Hanford, Wash. nuclear waste cleanup project.

Because of ongoing litigation and disagreements over whether two ex-contractor employees have proven whistleblower status, Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., took their testimony in the form of an "unofficial" roundtable discussion before convening an official hearing at which Energy officials declined to be seated alongside representatives of the major engineering companies that fired the safety specialists who had raised concerns.

"I don't think anyone wants to be a whistleblower," said McCaskill, who chairs the contracting subcommittee of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. "Reporting your colleagues, who may be your friends, for actions that look like waste, fraud, abuse or a danger to others, isn't an easy decision for most people. But the job that whistleblowers do is tremendously important and valuable. That's why, when courageous men and women feel compelled to speak out, we do not want to silence them."

The two safety experts, Donna Busche, the former manager of environmental and nuclear safety for San Francisco-based URS Corp, and nuclear engineer Mark Tamosaitis were both terminated by URS

after they jointly questioned the company's long-term process for containing radioactive leaks from World War II-era legacy storage tanks and creating a new process for converting them to glass for safe and permanent storage.

Busche said that she had enjoyed accolades in her performance reviews going back to 2009 until, "miraculously, URS found performance problems -- like I don't get along with colleagues," right after she teamed up Tamosaitis and produced 56 questions pointing to risks in the mixing process for handling dangerous waste that includes hydrogen and plutonium, which could explode and incapacitate the Hanford plant. She was fired in February. "We had no forum to raise our concerns other than to adjudicate it in court for six or seven years," she said.

Tamosaitis said he was told as early as 2006 by his URS managers not to raise safety concerns. "Those issues stood in the way of Bechtel [the prime contractor] winning their award," he said. "Whether the project is going forward, backward, or standing still, they're going to get their funds." He was fired in October only weeks after Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz in September released a staffwide memo calling for a culture that encourages honest whistleblowers. And, added, URS withheld his severance pay until he agreed to sign a statement granting them immunity, a move he likened to "extortion."

The Energy Department is "outmanned, outmanaged and outgunned by contractors," Tamosaitis said. "The Waste Treatment Plant and DOE culture are at a tipping point. If there is no change, I feel real bad for the next generation of federal workers."

McCaskill accused the contractors, with Energy's passive compliance, of "suppressing technical dissent" and for using prolonged legal tactics-- often reimbursed she said on the taxpayers' dime--to "keep the money and the performance bonuses flowing" on a project that has risen dramatically in price and duration. "We need to think in terms of empowering DOE" to control what happens to whistleblowers, she said, but the agency lacks the "manpower, expertise and resources."

Bill Eckroade, deputy chief of operations at Energy's Office of Health Safety and Security, said the department has conducted two safety culture assessments at Hanford and is planning a third review. Its reports from 2010 and 2012, he said, "found that most people interviewed were comfortable raising safety concerns, but a significant number said there was a chilling environment." He said safety and whistleblower freedom were a "high priority" for Energy, which has brought in experts from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for training. But he acknowledged that the department, "while growing in competency, is not yet mature."

Matt Moury, deputy assistant secretary for safety, security and quality programs in environmental management, said the Energy secretary had traveled to the site and had taken actions such as instituting new local leadership, clarifying rules, revising contractor performance standards and improving headquarters oversight. "But DOE was not called in and didn't approve when Busche was terminated," he said, noting that his office had referred her case to the inspector general. "I understand your frustration" with creating a safety culture," he told the senators. "But these things are incredibly complex, and take a long time to resolve."

His testimony prompted Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., to call his plan of action "gobbledygook." Johnson mocked Energy for being in the nuclear waste disposal field for 50 years and accused the agency of not having the technical expertise on staff.

James Taylor, URS Corp's senior vice president of global management and operations services, said his company had "zero tolerance for retaliation against whistleblowers" and that "safety is firmly embedded in company culture." Busche, he said, "was terminated for cause due to her conduct and behavior." Citing litigation and privacy issues, he said he could not go into details, but he denied she had been retaliated against.

Michael Graham, principal vice president for prime contractor Bechtel, said his company has several levels of procedure for resolving "professional technical disagreements" and that all personnel are expected to participate in "a strong safety culture." "URS alone made the decision to terminate Busche," he said. "We were informed by letter, which we forwarded to DOE."

GAO Report: Nuclear Safety: Countries' Regulatory Bodies Have Made Changes in Response to the Fukushima Daiichi Accident

Government Accountability Office

March 6, 2014

[LINK](#)

What GAO Found

All the nuclear regulatory bodies in the 16 selected countries in GAO's review--13 of which currently operate nuclear power reactors and 3 of which are developing or considering developing civilian nuclear power programs--have taken steps to strengthen nuclear safety in response to the Fukushima Daiichi accident in Japan. Japan in particular has fundamentally restructured its nuclear regulatory framework, and 3 other countries--China, Sweden, and Vietnam--are providing additional resources to their nuclear regulatory bodies. Countries are taking steps to improve safety with a focus on considering previously unimagined accident scenarios. Specifically, regulatory bodies in several countries (e.g., Belgium, Canada, Russia, and the United States) are now planning for accident scenarios that could involve multiple reactors at a single power plant. In addition, new requirements for emergency equipment, such as backup electric generators, in case of the loss of off-site power, as occurred at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, are an area of focus among the regulatory bodies in GAO's review.

Officials from 6 of the 13 countries with operating nuclear power reactors in GAO's review said they have automated systems for collecting and transmitting critical nuclear power plant data to the nuclear regulatory body or designated technical experts who work with the regulatory body during an accident, and officials from a seventh country said that it has plans to build such a system. Officials from 3 of the countries with automated systems, including the United States, told GAO they are considering steps to ensure their systems can operate in certain

emergency conditions, such as during the loss of off-site power, but none has a specific timetable for doing so. For example, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is first completing higher priority nuclear safety enhancements before deciding whether or how to upgrade its automated system because how enhancements are done may affect how upgrades to an automated system would be implemented. By delaying its decision on upgrades to enable the system to function under emergency conditions, the system may not function when needed most--during a severe accident.

Three key international organizations--the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the World Association of Nuclear Operators, and the European Union-- along with the Convention on Nuclear Safety, have taken steps to support nuclear regulatory bodies and help them identify the most important lessons of the Fukushima Daiichi accident and promote regulatory changes to enhance nuclear safety worldwide. For example, one key way IAEA helps countries improve nuclear safety and regulatory effectiveness is through peer review missions, which evaluate, among other things, a country's nuclear safety regulatory framework based on IAEA Safety Standards and good regulatory practices. However, according to IAEA officials, the agency does not systematically track whether the recommendations of the peer review missions are implemented by the host countries. Without this information, IAEA cannot fully determine the impact and effectiveness of the peer review missions.

Why GAO Did This Study

The March 2011 accident at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant led to a worldwide review of nuclear power programs. NRC licenses and oversees civilian nuclear reactors. The State Department coordinates policy matters with international organizations and treaties, including those dealing with nuclear safety.

GAO was asked to examine (1) the actions nuclear regulatory bodies from selected countries have taken to strengthen nuclear safety; (2) the extent to which these countries have established automated systems to collect and transmit accident data; and (3) steps international organizations have taken to support nuclear regulatory bodies and promote nuclear safety worldwide since the accident. The countries GAO selected represent a cross section of established and emerging nuclear power countries. GAO also reviewed relevant documents and interviewed or obtained information from U.S. federal agencies, 15 foreign nuclear regulatory bodies, and international organizations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends (1) that State and NRC work with and encourage IAEA to systematically track the status of recommendations made by IAEA peer review missions and (2) NRC consider expediting its decision on whether or how to upgrade its automated system for transmitting key reactor data. NRC neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendations. State partially concurred with the first recommendation and had no comment on the second. GAO believes that fully implementing these recommendations would enhance nuclear safety.

