

UNITED STATES
NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION
OFFICE OF NUCLEAR REACTOR REGULATION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20555-0001

September 13, 2002

**NRC REGULATORY ISSUE SUMMARY 2002-16
CURRENT INCIDENT RESPONSE ISSUES**

ADDRESSEES

All holders of operating licenses for nuclear power plants.

INTENT

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is issuing this regulatory issue summary (RIS) to discuss several incident response issues which may be of interest to nuclear power plant licensees. This RIS does not transmit any new requirements or staff positions. No action or written response is required.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

One of the NRC's performance goals is to increase public confidence in the NRC. To achieve that goal, the NRC relies on licensees to provide accurate and timely information regarding incidents at licensed facilities. The NRC staff has become aware of two incident response issues that affect this performance goal: (1) the consistency and accuracy of licensee communications regarding unplanned radioactivity releases, and (2) the ability of licensee event response communicators to provide accurate and timely responses to NRC requests for information during an event or exercise. In addition, this RIS provides licensees with an overview of the types of information that would typically be requested by the staff over the Health Physics Network (HPN) during an exercise or actual emergency.

SUMMARY OF ISSUES

Consistency and Accuracy of Licensee Communications Regarding Unplanned Radioactivity Releases

In at least one instance a licensee stated that "no release (above technical specification limits)" had occurred when it reported information regarding an ongoing declared emergency at its facility to the state and local governments. Several government agencies mistakenly thought that no release had occurred, although the licensee stated clearly in other documents that a very minor release might have occurred. Contradictory messages were passed back and forth among various agencies and to the media, causing considerable confusion. As a direct result of this event, several States have changed their notification forms to require a more precise description of the nature and size of a release of radioactivity.

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Reports on the nature and size of radioactivity releases from nuclear power plants should be consistent, accurate, and timely. NRC licensees have a vested interest in increasing public confidence through clear and consistent communications to the media and public. Licensees are encouraged to review communication plans and internal procedures for press releases in light of this issue. To minimize confusion, NRC's Office of Public Affairs suggests that the following statements could be used to describe situations occurring during declared emergencies that may involve relatively small radioactivity releases that are at or just above the reporting requirements:

- *A minor release below Federally approved operating limits has occurred.*
- *A small release above Federally approved operating limits has occurred.*

To address community concerns, NRC's Office of Public Affairs calls attention to the good practices of some licensees in taking appropriate environmental samples at the site boundary, at the earliest opportunity consistent with their Emergency Plan commitment, and sharing the results with the public, while keeping the findings in accurate perspective. For example, should the sampling show no elevated reading, it would be appropriate and reassuring to share that information with the public, perhaps adding that further readings would be taken and similarly released.

Ability of Licensee Communicators to Provide Accurate and Timely Information to NRC During an Event or Exercise

Licensees are required by 10 CFR 50.72(c)(3) to "maintain an open, continuous communication channel with the NRC Operations Center upon request by the NRC." This requirement is based on the NRC's need to have accurate and timely information related to ongoing events at NRC-licensed facilities. During the conduct of exercises, the staff has noticed instances when licensee Emergency Notification System (ENS) telephone communicators have been unable to provide accurate information in a timely manner either because they lack experience or their physical location precludes clear observation of plant parameters or timely awareness of response decisions.

If the Emergency Response Data System (ERDS) is available during an event, the staff usually calls the licensee's ENS communicator to confirm information observed on the ERDS. If the ERDS is not available, the ENS is NRC's principal method of obtaining current plant data. In either case, the staff's response is more efficient if the NRC can obtain timely information regarding matters such as critical plant parameters, the resources the licensee has available, the procedure or procedures the licensee is following, and the priorities the licensee has established to minimize the consequences of the event. If the licensee's ENS communicator does not have this information, the value of communications over the ENS is significantly diminished. The staff suggests that licensees review previous related discussions of this issue, including those discussions contained in NRC Information Notices (INs) 85-80, 86-97, 87-58 and 91-77.

The ENS communicator could be placed in the Technical Support Center (TSC) so that he or she has ready access to the Safety Parameter Display System (SPDS) and ERDS data and to the engineers and managers responsible for the licensee's actions. The NRC anticipates that the ENS communicator knows enough about plant emergency response to discuss plant conditions without having to leave the telephone to respond to a question. If the communicator must use a telephone in an isolated location, the staff suggests that a "runner" might be used rather than having the ENS communicator leave the telephone for minutes at a time to find answers to NRC questions. This discussion may also be relevant to licensee Health Physics Network (HPN) telephone communicators.

Information Typically Requested Over the Health Physics Network

Generic Letter 91-14, "Emergency Telecommunications," discusses the Emergency Telecommunication System (ETS) and includes descriptions of the essential emergency communications functions. The Emergency Notification System (ENS) and the Health Physics Network (HPN) are both described. The HPN provides communications with the licensee regarding radiological (on- and off-site) and meteorological conditions. Also transmitted via the HPN is the licensee's assessment of trends and the need for protective measures, both on- and off-site. Depending upon the circumstances, the HPN line may not be manned early during an event; however, based on the nature and duration of an emergency response, it should be expected that the HPN will be utilized and the licensee may be requested to provide continuous staffing. Information that may be requested over the HPN line could include, but is not limited to, the following:

1. Is there any change to the classification of the event? If so, what is the reason?
2. Have toxic or radiological releases occurred or been projected (including changes in the release rate)? If so, what are the actual or currently projected on-site and off-site releases, and what is the basis for this assessment?
3. What are the health effects or consequences to on-site and off-site people? How many onsite or offsite people are being or will be affected and to what extent?
4. Is the event under control? When was control established, or what is the planned action to bring the event under control? What mitigative actions are currently underway or planned?
5. What on-site protective measures have been taken or are planned?
6. What off-site protective actions are being considered or have been recommended to state and local officials?
7. What are the current meteorological conditions?
8. What are the dose and dose rate readings on-site and off-site?

The NRC uses information of this nature, provided by the licensee, to independently assess the potential health and safety consequences, evaluate the facility's condition and determine the adequacy of the facility's protective measures.

BACKFIT DISCUSSION

This RIS does not require any action or written response or require any modification to plant structures, systems, components, or designs of facilities; therefore, the staff did not perform a backfit analysis.

FEDERAL REGISTER NOTIFICATION

A notice of opportunity for public comment was not published in the *Federal Register* because this RIS is informational and pertains to a staff position that does not represent a departure from current regulatory requirements and practice.

PAPERWORK REDUCTION ACT STATEMENT

This RIS does not request any information collection.

If you have any questions about this RIS, please contact the person listed below or the appropriate Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation project manager.

/RA/

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Attachment: List of Recently Regulatory Issue Summary