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Energy Department Cites Pantex Plant for Nuclear Safety Violations

The Department of Energy (DOE) has issued a Preliminary Notice of Violation and an \$82,500 civil penalty to the Mason & Hanger Corporation, operator of the department's Pantex Plant in Amarillo, Texas, for safety violations associated with a fire in a nuclear weapons disassembly facility. The isopropyl alcohol fire took place in December 1998 as workers were cleaning a component that had been separated from a nuclear weapon.

DOE investigators determined that the fire directly resulted from Mason & Hanger's failure to establish proper controls that would have prevented the fire, as well as failure to follow requirements already in place to ensure that the component cleaning process was completed safely. The fire was small and did not result in injury or serious danger to workers or pose a threat to the public and the environment. "Any fire in close proximity to explosive material has the potential to ignite that material," said David Michaels, DOE Assistant Secretary for Environment, Safety and Health. "While this would not result in a nuclear detonation, an explosion of any kind is unacceptable."

DOE expressed special concern that even though the fire hazard at Pantex had been previously identified, management failed to establish controls to eliminate the hazard. "It is our expectation that our contractors take ownership of safety in their activities and identify and correct safety weaknesses," said Michaels. Michaels noted that the potential penalty of \$110,000 was reduced by 25 percent in recognition of the contractor's subsequent aggressive investigation to uncover the violations and causes of the fire. The action represents the first civil penalty at Pantex since the enforcement program began three years ago.

The civil penalty accompanies a Preliminary Notice of Violation which requires the contractor to identify actions it will take to prevent reoccurrence of such fires and expected completion dates. DOE will then determine whether further enforcement action is required. The notice will become final in 30 days unless the contractor provides sufficient justification and information to rebut the findings of the enforcement action.

The civil penalty was issued by DOE's enforcement office with support from the DOE

Amarillo Area Office. The Price Anderson Amendments Act of 1988 gives DOE authority to issue penalties to its contractors that violate nuclear safety requirements.

Copies of the Preliminary Notices of Violation and additional information are available via the Internet at: <http://tis.eh.doe.gov/enforce>

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