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DOE Releases Root Cause Analysis Relating to USGS Emails

Washington, D.C. —The Department of Energy (DOE), Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management (OCRWM) issued a report today presenting the results of an investigation and analysis conducted following the discovery of emails written by a small number of U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) employees performing Yucca Mountain-related work between 1998 and 2004.

The report, entitled “*Root Cause Analysis Report in Response to Condition Report 5223 Regarding Emails Suggesting Noncompliance with Quality Assurance Requirements*,” reflects the findings of a Root Cause Analysis Team review of the emails to determine potential noncompliance with quality assurance requirements. The USGS employees had been involved in the computer modeling of water infiltration at Yucca Mountain. The Team found that the negative attitudes toward quality assurance requirements reflected in the USGS emails were not pervasive throughout the OCRWM program. The Team’s findings were based on extensive reviews of emails, corrective action program documentation, and employee concerns program records.

While the Root Cause Analysis Team also found no evidence that information associated with the USGS work was falsified or modified as suggested in the emails, certain of the infiltration modeling products on which these employees worked did not meet OCRWM’s traceability and transparency requirements. The Team further found that corrective actions to address issues associated with the infiltration products were not always effective. The report identifies as the root cause of these conditions a failure by OCRWM senior management to establish and hold the OCRWM organization accountable for meeting quality expectations with regard to the USGS infiltration products. The report includes recommendations to ensure that USGS infiltration work conforms to OCRWM’s quality assurance requirements, and also to improve OCRWM management processes. The report also includes a Corrective Action Plan to address the recommendations.

“We have developed an aggressive action plan to make necessary improvements, including enhancing the nuclear culture and improving line management ownership and implementation of quality,” said Ward Sproat, Director of OCRWM. “We are asking nuclear industry experts to provide insight into industry best practices and recommendations for implementation.”

The Root Cause Analysis report is one of a number of OCRWM’s actions in response to the discovery of these emails. A technical impacts report was also issued in February 2006, and Sandia National Laboratories is now working to verify or replace the infiltration modeling work done by USGS.

In addition, the Department will soon issue a contract for an independent review of OCRWM's quality assurance processes. This independent review is one of three that Sproat informed Congress he would undertake. The other independent reviews include one focused on engineering processes, which has already been awarded; and one for a review of the license application.

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