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NRC BEGINS SPECIAL INSPECTION AT IRRADIATOR FACILITY IN PUERTO RICO

A team of NRC specialists has been sent to Puerto Rico to look into the circumstances surrounding an event at an irradiator facility in which the radioactive source was stuck in an exposed position. The facility, Baxter Healthcare Corporation in Aibonito, Puerto Rico, restored the source to a shielded position over the weekend.

The industrial irradiator contains cobalt-60 in two source racks. Products that are to be irradiated enter the irradiator cell on a conveyor. The source is lifted out of a water-filled pool, the product is exposed to radiation, and then moved out of the cell. When not in use, the radioactive material is stored under water in the pool.

Last Wednesday (4/21), the operators were lowering the source racks back into the pool when one rack jammed, leaving the source exposed. No personnel exposures have been reported. Radiation levels outside the irradiator room remained at normal levels. MDS Nordion, the irradiator manufacturer, sent a team to the facility to assist in the recovery.

On Thursday of last week, the NRC issued a letter to Baxter Healthcare confirming the actions the company has agreed to take in response to the event. The company has agreed to conduct a safety assessment and root cause analysis and discuss these with the NRC before restarting operations.

An NRC inspector responded to the facility last week to oversee the radiation protection aspects of recovery operations. Two additional inspectors have been dispatched. The team will review the recovery operation and the company's root cause analysis. It is expected the team will be on site through this week. A written report will be issued within 30 days of the end of the inspection.

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