

Energy Department Fines Savannah River Contractor \$220,000 for Nuclear Safety Violations

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WASHINGTON, DC The U.S. Department of Energy has completed its regulatory review and fined Westinghouse Savannah River Co. \$220,000 and issued a Preliminary Notice of Violation for violations of Energy Department nuclear safety rules at the department's Savannah River Site in Aiken, S.C. The penalty stems from a September 1999 event in which eight workers were accidentally exposed to plutonium, one in excess of the regulatory limit.

"This unfortunate exposure was clearly preventable," said Dr. David Michaels, Assistant Secretary for Environment, Safety and Health. "Westinghouse management knew of problems with radiological work controls and event response from a similar worker exposure at the site in 1996. Several subsequent assessments and this incident clearly demonstrate that those problems have not been effectively addressed."

The workers were exposed to plutonium at the plant's FB-Line Facility while preparing plutonium storage containers for transfer to another on-site location. A defective weld in one of the containers allowed plutonium to be released, activating the alarm on an adjacent air monitor.

Although the exposure did not cause any immediate health consequences to the workers and no long range consequences are anticipated, one worker's exposure was over the federal limit. All involved workers were placed on various temporary work restrictions to limit additional exposures.

Energy Department investigators say several factors contributed to the accident, including:

- Effective processes were not in place to ensure the integrity of the welds on storage cans. While weld leak testing performed on the storage can involved in the event did not identify a significant defect, the operators performing visual weld inspections were not formally trained or qualified in weld inspection. Additionally, prior weld production problems were not formally analyzed, representing a missed opportunity for potential process improvements.
- Work and event response activities did not follow approved procedures, including inadequate radiological monitoring for the work being done. A required contamination survey of the plutonium storage cans was not performed before the operator handled them. Required radiological surveys were not immediately performed on the highly contaminated operator who exited the vault after the alarm sounded. At least one worker who was not present during the accident was cross-contaminated as a result.
- Management did not ensure that effective design features such as adequate ventilation were in place to ensure possible exposures were as low as reasonably achievable.

The Energy Department is proposing partial mitigation of the \$275,000 base civil penalty for

these violations, based on the contractor's thorough investigation of the event and the broad scope of corrective actions that Westinghouse has committed to take.

Several corrective actions have already been taken by management at the site, including inspecting all similarly welded cans for leaks and improving the welding and inspection processes. The department will validate these and additional corrective actions being performed by Westinghouse and determine whether further enforcement action is required.

The notice will become final Aug. 17 – 30 days after the Preliminary Notice of Violation – unless Westinghouse Savannah River Co. provides sufficient justification and information to rebut the findings of the enforcement action.

A copy of the violation is available on the Internet at: <http://www.eh.doe.gov/enforce>.

News Media Contact:

April Kaufman, 202/586-5806

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