

Energy Department Cites Argonne National Laboratory-West for Violating Nuclear Safety Requirements

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WASHINGTON, DC The U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Office of Environment, Safety and Health has cited the University of Chicago, operator of the Argonne National Laboratory-West Laboratory in Idaho Falls, Idaho, for several nuclear safety violations that took place in 2000. The enforcement action would have been accompanied by a civil penalty of \$110,000, but as the University of Chicago is one of the not-for-profit institutions currently exempt by statute from paying civil penalties, the penalty is remitted.

"We support this action not because there were serious injuries or environmental releases, but because we understand the value of identifying and correcting problems before they result in serious worker injuries, or accidents that could hurt the public," said Marvin Gunn, manager of DOE's Chicago Operations Office. "Argonne has already made significant management changes and we expect this action will reinforce the commitment to make those changes permanent and effective."

One issue addressed in the Preliminary Notice of Violation concerns an April 2000 event in which a worker was contaminated while patching penetration holes at the Fuel Conditioning Facility, a facility used to prepare spent fuel for disposal. DOE found that the laboratory failed to effectively analyze the planned work activity and its associated hazards, and did not use design and administrative controls that would minimize worker exposures to hazardous materials. Although the worker intake resulting from the event was low, the activity involved the potential for significant levels of contamination.

The laboratory was also cited for failing to follow procedures for moving containers into a radiologically controlled area at the Fuel Conditioning Facility. Subsequent investigations by Argonne staff revealed that similar violations had been occurring over the past several years. While fissile material was not involved in the transfer, DOE is concerned with the long-standing and widespread nature of the violations in a radiological area, and the failure to maintain strict compliance with nuclear safety requirements.

The Notice also cites the Laboratory for its failure to effectively implement a formal quality improvement effort -- meaning that processes for detecting problems were not effective, root cause analyses were not routinely performed and corrective actions were often inadequate. Problems in the quality improvement area had been repeatedly identified to Argonne management in prior DOE reviews.

The Argonne-West Notice identifies two Severity Level II and two Severity Level III violations. Level I violations represent the most significant, with actual or potential significant consequences to the worker or public. In response to the Notice of Violation (whether or not there is a civil penalty), contractors are required to document specific actions taken and planned to prevent recurrence of similar events. The Chicago Operations Office will verify completion of corrective actions before the case is closed.

DOE noted that management changes have been made since the violations took place to put greater emphasis and visibility on nuclear safety requirements. These improvements include training and strengthening procedural requirements for nuclear work. Continued management attention to the weaknesses reflected in this enforcement action will be critical in order to achieve a substantial improvement in the safety culture for operations at Argonne National Lab-West.

Argonne National Laboratory West is part of the Argonne National Laboratory, which is operated by the University of Chicago for DOE. The laboratory performs large-scale nuclear facility testing and development to support research in the areas of energy, nuclear safety, spent nuclear fuel disposition, nonproliferation, and decontamination and decommissioning technologies.

The Price-Anderson Amendments Act of 1988 requires DOE to undertake regulatory enforcement actions against contractors for violations of DOE's nuclear safety requirements. This enforcement action was taken with the support and participation of the Department's Chicago Operations Office.

Additional details can be found on the Internet at <http://www.eh.doe.gov/enforce>.

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