

NRC: Bad coating led to leak of tritium

By BEN LEACH, Staff Writer, 609-272-7261 | Posted: Thursday, July 9, 2009

The tritium leak at Oyster Creek Generating Station was 18 years in the making.

On Wednesday, Exelon, the Lacey Township nuclear plant's parent company, said the leaks of tritium, a naturally occurring radioactive form of hydrogen, were the result of "improperly applied coatings" dating to the early 1990s.

In 1991, engineers reported that two underground pipes had been excavated and completely recoated. Apparently the recoating was not thorough enough.

Adjoining areas of the pipes that were not coated properly allowed moisture to seep in, causing corrosion over time. There was no threat to public or employee safety at any time, according to the information made public Wednesday.

"This will change our practices," said David Benson, a spokesman for Oyster Creek.

Benson said the report, known as a root cause analysis report, is meant to be as self-critical as possible. The report is prompting Oyster Creek to reconsider how it manages its underground pipes, even going so far as to consider building them above ground so they are easier to monitor.

"It's pushed us back into looking at this database to make sure that there are no discrepancies," Benson said.

The statement said the original document from 1991 contained "errors." Environmentalists are looking at the new information as more evidence that Oyster Creek should not have had its operating license renewed for another 20 years April 9, a little more than a week before the tritium was first discovered.

"This underscores a large failure on the part of the (Nuclear Regulatory Commission)," said Matt Elliott, clean energy advocate for Environment New Jersey.

The root cause analysis released Wednesday was made public by Exelon, not the NRC. A statement issued by the NRC on Wednesday said the inspectors at the federal organization "welcome and support the release of this information," and that they would be issuing their own evaluation within 45 days of a completed inspection.

A spokesperson for the NRC did not return phone calls for comment Wednesday.

"This should have been caught," said Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club. "It just shows that this plant is aging and has problems."

A letter explaining the results of the root cause analysis will be mailed to about 8,300 residents living near the nuclear plant.

Early Wednesday morning, Oyster Creek reduced the power generated to about 60 percent of full capacity for maintenance on the plant's condenser. The powering-down of the plant was not related to the continued analysis of the underground pipes or the tritium investigation, according to Benson.

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