



Nuclear Free Local Authorities Steering Committee

information

NFLA Media release - for immediate release, 7th May 2014

Another safety incident at Sellafield – NFLA remains concerned about the safety of this sensitive facility

The NFLA is concerned to hear that the Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR) has, for the first time ever, cautioned two workers at the Sellafield facility (rather than the site operators) for undertaking unauthorised work in a part of the site that contains the highly sensitive High Level Waste Storage Tanks (HASTS).

According to a report on the ONR website, the two workers were attempting to remedy a fault on one of the suites of highly radioactive HAST's in December 2013. In an unauthorised and potentially risky manoeuvre, the workers removed a contaminated and malfunctioning resistance thermometer from a pocket on one of the HASTS. (1)

This unauthorised action by the workers exposed them to elevated levels of radiation, though it was within proscribed dose limits. However, it also resulted in the spread of radioactive contamination into another area of the HAST complex, which the ONR conclude was 'not specifically designed, maintained or used to prevent the spread of contamination'. This posed a serious health risk to the two workers and to other workers.

The incident was contrary to the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974. The ONR concluded it was caused 'solely by the acts and omissions of the individuals, in full knowledge of what was required by the company to safely control and carry out the work. This was a direct violation of established, well-known and obvious risk control measures and arrangements for working with ionising radiation implemented by the employer'. As a result the ONR has cautioned the individual workers, rather than the Sellafield site owners. In the event either of the two workers is involved in another safety incident in the next five years then legal proceedings would be taken on them by the ONR. The workers have accepted the caution.

As the local pressure group, Cumbrians Opposed to a Radioactive Environment (CORE) have noted in their media release on this incident, the nuclear regulator has routinely raised concerns about the robustness of the steel tanks that hold the highly radioactive and thermally hot liquid wastes produced by Sellafield's reprocessing operations. These tanks have suffered a number of 'loss of coolant' events over previous years and require 24/7 cooling, through a system of internal cooling coils and external cooling jackets. This system has suffered corrosion problems and has degraded over the years. If reprocessing at the facility were to continue at the site, new HASTS would have to be built, at an estimated cost of £500 million. (2) This is one of the reasons why the NFLA are calling for the closure of the Sellafield THORP reprocessing plant. (3)

Given the damning indictments of the Sellafield site by the National Audit Office and the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee, (4) the NFLA remain concerned about another safety incident at the site. It calls on the Sellafield site owners to review this incident, understand why its staff undertook unauthorised activity and robustly improve its safety procedures. Yet again, the staff and the wider public have been put at potential risk by a safety incident at Sellafield.

NFLA Chair Councillor Mark Hackett said:

"I welcome the decision by the ONR to caution two workers at Sellafield for unauthorised and potentially dangerous activities in one of the most sensitive parts of the plant. I believe it to be another incident that should not have happened and I call on the Sellafield site owners to fully review why the

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workers took the action they did. For a robust health and safety culture to work effectively it has to be implemented by all the staff concerned. That staff are undertaking unauthorised work has to be of concern to all those monitoring the work of the most sensitive nuclear site in the UK. Incidents like this simply should not happen. It is worth remembering that staff at the Chernobyl nuclear power station undertook unauthorised work which resulted in one of the worst nuclear accidents the world has ever seen. Sellafield's owners have to get a grip on such matters as it seems that safety incidents are continuing to happen on a regular basis."

Ends

For more information please contact Sean Morris, NFLA Secretary on 07771 930196.

Notes for editors:

- (1) Office for Nuclear Regulation media release, 1st May 2014
<http://news.onr.org.uk/2014/05/formal-cautions-issued-to-contamination-incident-workers/>
- (2) CORE Media Release, 6th May 2014
<http://www.corecumbria.co.uk/newsapp/pressreleases/pressmain.asp?StrNewsID=337>
- (3) NFLA Policy Briefing on Sellafield's overseas origin contracts and the Sellafield THORP plant, 30th April 2014,
http://www.nuclearpolicy.info/docs/news/NFLA_overseas_radwaste_and_Thorp_response.pdf
- (4) See the following NFLA media releases for its comments on the NAO and PAC reports:
http://www.nuclearpolicy.info/docs/news/NFLA_Sellafield_value_for_money.pdf
http://www.nuclearpolicy.info/docs/news/NFLA_NAO_NDA_report.pdf

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