

Regulatory Commission (NRC) calls near-miss incidents “accident sequence precursor” incidents, Johnson says, and he describes them as incidents in which the NRC sends an inspection team to investigate an event or condition that increases the chance of reactor core damage by a factor of 10 or more.

According to the UCS, two of the incidents were related to security and the third involved an air conditioner working at 30 percent capacity in what Johnson calls “a critical part of the reactor.”

Angela Walz of Energy Northwest, which runs CGS, calls most of the UCS report “inaccurate” and says, “We’ve had no near-miss incidents at Columbia, and we remain in the NRC’s least stringent oversight category because of our excellent safety performance.”

She adds, “UCS misassociated three NRC special in-

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—NUCLEAR ENGINEER DAVID LOCHBAUM

spectations with safety incidents. Two of those inspections we purposefully initiated, and they resulted in a clean bill of health from the NRC regarding station security procedures.” Walz says the third inspection looked at how CGS tests and maintains air coolers and led to a finding of “very low safety significance” from the NRC.

The author of the UCS report, nuclear engineer David Lochbaum, writes, “Time will tell whether the trio of near-misses at the Columbia Generating Station was merely bad luck or indicative of broader programmatic deficiencies.”

Nuclear safety issues arose at the recent Public Interest Environmental Law Conference in Eugene with retired NASA scientist James Hansen, who has suggested nuclear power as a solution to the problem of global warming. Johnson says Hansen is “rightly venerated for his research and for his willingness and bravery in risking his career to declare climate change is a huge problem.” But he says that Hansen should not “hang his entire strategy for avoiding climate change on experimental reactors that haven’t worked very well” and that are a fire and nuclear proliferation danger in addition to their unsolved nuclear waste issues.

— Camilla Mortensen

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