

News from Beyond Nuclear

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Contacts:

Nuclear Engineer Arnie Gundersen, (802) 865-9955

Attorney Terry Lodge, (419) 205-7084

Michael Keegan, Don't Waste Michigan, (734) 770-1441

Kevin Kamps, Beyond Nuclear, (240) 462-3216

Fermi 3 Quality Assurance Crumbling

Critics slam systemic three-tiered Quality Assurance (QA) failures with Fermi 3's application, the Economically Simplified Boiling Water Reactor (ESBWR) design, and NRC's oversight of QA

Monroe, MI – On Monday, environmental intervenors against the proposed Fermi 3 petitioned the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission's (NRC) Atomic Safety and Licensing Board seeking suspension of the new reactor's combined Construction and Operating License Application (COLA) proceedings until all three systemic Quality Assurance (QA) problems have been proven to be resolved. Petitioners note that the NRC's Office of Inspector General (OIG) has documented NRC staff QA failures, and argue that until NRC itself is competent at such oversight, there can be no meaningful safety review of QA on the Fermi 3 reactor's design, construction, and operation.

NRC's OIG reported, on November 16, that NRC staff are unable to verify that QA review coordination has occurred, and that all QA regulations have been fully satisfied, on new reactor COLAs. In addition, NRC's OIG questioned the accuracy of documents translated from foreign languages used for design, construction, and operation of new nuclear power plants. This latter point is especially relevant at Fermi 3, given Hitachi of Japan's primary involvement in designing the ESBWR, and the likely role of Japan Steel Works in manufacturing Fermi 3's reactor pressure vessel and other large nuclear components.

One week ago, the opponents of Fermi 3 ripped into Detroit Edison (DTE) and the NRC for attempting to have quality assurance (QA) concerns omitted from adjudicated hearings on Contention 15, having to do with DTE COLA violations.

Citing multiple internal NRC staff emails, the environmental coalition revealed several key NRC staff people have questioned whether Detroit Edison can truthfully guarantee that quality

systems, structures and components would be built into the proposed Fermi 3 General Electric-Hitachi boiling water reactor. The Intervenor have called upon NRC's Atomic Safety and Licensing Board for a suspension of the construction and operating license application proceeding until such guarantees can be made.

The coalition submitted a 33-page declaration from Arnold Gundersen, a career nuclear engineer, who quoted internal NRC staff emails and analyzed the staff criticisms in light of federal requirements. One NRC quality assurance overseer stated, "At this time [June 4, 2009], the application is not providing an applicant's QA program for these activities as required by [Part] 52.79(a)(25) [of the NRC's regulations]." That same staffer said on June 8, 2009 that "This issue puts into question the quality of the overall application."

"This inadequacy of Detroit Edison's Quality Assurance Program cannot be repaired simply by a quick fix. This gaping hole in legally mandated QA must be addressed by the NRC and rectified by Detroit Edison. The only way to resolve this breach is to start over with a fully implemented QA Program and go back and look at every analysis since 2007. The people of Michigan should not have to shoulder the cost of repeating these studies," said Gundersen, Chief Engineer for Fairewinds Associates, Inc.

"A quality assurance program has to start at the very beginning of the design for a huge project like Fermi 3," said Terry Lodge, attorney for the environmental intervenors. "The utility has to guarantee that they won't buy junk parts or electrical components from manufacturers who care about making a quick buck and don't care if the plant can perform properly in an emergency. This isn't just a 'paperwork' issue, it's about protecting the public's health and safety."

"Given that quality assurance is the very foundation upon which the entire Fermi 3 project is based, DTE might as well build this new atomic reactor on quicksand in terms of its environmental and radiological safety and its financial viability. This project places all parties in peril," added Keith Gunter of Beyond Nuclear who lives in Livonia, Michigan.

The environmental coalition opposing Fermi 3 includes Beyond Nuclear, Citizens for Alternatives to Chemical Contamination, Citizens Environmental Alliance of Southwestern Ontario, Don't Waste Michigan, and the Sierra Club Michigan Chapter.

Documents associated with this ESBWR design QA contention, and the rest of the Fermi 3 intervention, are posted at Beyond Nuclear's website, www.beyondnuclear.org.

Beyond Nuclear aims to educate and activate the public about the connections between nuclear power and nuclear weapons and the need to abandon both to safeguard our future. Beyond Nuclear advocates for an energy future that is sustainable, benign and democratic. The Beyond Nuclear team works with diverse partners and allies to provide the public, government officials, and the media with the critical information necessary to move humanity toward a world beyond nuclear.

Contact information

Beyond Nuclear

6930 Carroll Avenue, Suite 400

Takoma Park, MD 20912

Tel: 301.270.2209 Fax: 301.270.4000

Email:

info@beyondnuclear.org

Web site:

www.beyondnuclear.org