

U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION
Region III Office of Public Affairs
801 Warrenville Road, Lisle, IL 60532-4351

NEWS ANNOUNCEMENT: RIII-98-14 February 12, 1998
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NRC, U.S. ENRICHMENT CORP. OFFICIALS TO DISCUSS
APPARENT VIOLATIONS AT PORTSMOUTH PLANT

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff will meet Thursday, February 19, with representatives of the U.S. Enrichment Corporation for a predecisional enforcement conference on apparent violations at the Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant, located in Piketon, Ohio.

The meeting will start at 1:00 p.m. (CT) in the Third Floor Conference Room of the NRC Region III Office, 801 Warrenville Road, Lisle, Illinois. It is open to public observation. NRC officials will be available at the conclusion to answer questions from the news media and other interested observers.

U.S. Enrichment Corporation operates the Portsmouth plant under a lease from the Department of Energy, the owner and previous operator. Effective March of last year, regulatory authority over plant operations was transferred from the Department of Energy to the NRC. The facility uses a gaseous diffusion process to enrich uranium hexafluoride in the uranium-235 isotope, so that the material can be used as nuclear fuel in civilian nuclear power plants.

The discussion will focus on the corporation's apparent weak implementation of the nuclear criticality safety program at the plant. This program establishes controls to ensure that, during operations, uranium remains subcritical--that is, it minimizes the chance of an accidental chain reaction.

During an inspection in December and January, NRC inspectors found program inadequacies that included training, root cause evaluations and corrective actions. In addition, the inspectors noted an apparent failure by plant staff to implement all the required controls for a non-operating cell that contained a deposit of enriched uranium greater than the minimum safe amount.

The decision to hold an enforcement conference does not mean the NRC has determined that a violation has occurred or that enforcement action will be taken. Rather, the purpose is to discuss apparent violations, their causes and safety

significance; to provide the licensee an opportunity to point out any errors that may have been made in the NRC inspection report; and to enable the company to outline its proposed corrective actions.

No decision on the apparent violations or any contemplated enforcement action, such as a fine, will be made at this conference. Those decisions will be made by senior NRC officials at a later date.

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