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NRC PROPOSES $3,250 CIVIL PENALTY FOR ELIZABETH, PA., FIRM OVER TEMPORARY LOSS OF NUCLEAR GAUGE

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff is proposing a $3,250 fine for a firm based in Elizabeth (Allegheny County), Pa., based on a violation of agency requirements stemming from the temporary loss of a nuclear gauge. The gauge involved contains radioactive material and is used for such industrial purposes as measuring the density of soil at construction sites.

NRC inspectors identified the violation during an inspection conducted in January and February 2006 at the Elizabeth offices of GeoMechanics, Inc. The inspection was performed in response to an event in September of last year. On Sept. 18, 2005, a company employee authorized to use nuclear gauges parked a pickup truck in the lot of a South Charleston, W.Va., motel. The truck contained a gauge, which holds small amounts of cesium-137 and americium-241 in sealed form. The gauge was in a locked container in the open bed of the vehicle.

On the following morning, the employee discovered the lock had been cut and the container, including the gauge, had been removed. Local police and the NRC were immediately notified.

The gauge, still in its container and undamaged, was found abandoned on Sept. 23, 2005, along a highway in Danville, W.Va.

As a result of the NRC inspection, the violation by GeoMechanics was identified. Specifically, the NRC, as of July 2005, requires that a minimum of two independent physical controls be used to secure portable nuclear gauges from being stolen or lost. In this case, a single chain and lock were used to secure the gauge to the vehicle while it was parked overnight.

"Although you concluded that the source remained in its shielded position during the time the gauge was in the public domain and, therefore, no member of the public received measurable radiation exposure, this violation is of concern to the NRC because (1) the failure to control radioactive material resulted in the gauge being stolen and left on a public highway for approximately five days; and (2) such sources can result in unintended radiation doses to individuals if the source is removed from the shielded position," NRC Region I Administrator Samuel J. Collins wrote to the company in a letter regarding the enforcement action.

GeoMechanics representatives discussed the violation with NRC staff during a predecisional enforcement conference held in King of Prussia, Pa., on April 26, 2006. During that session, the company acknowledged the violation occurred and discussed its corrective actions designed to prevent a recurrence. These corrective actions include retraining all employees authorized to use nuclear gauges and redesigning the box within which a gauge is secured to a vehicle in order to ensure proper controls are maintained.

The company is required to provide the NRC with a written reply within 30 days.

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