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NEWS RELEASE *
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NUCLEAR WASTE RISKS "EYE-OPENING"

New NRC Study a Big Boost for Challenge of Shearon Harris Expansion

DURHAM – A new study of nuclear waste cooling pools conducted by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission finds that accidents risks are substantially higher than previously believed – with implications one NRC staffer called "quite eye-opening." The long-awaited report comes as a serious blow to CP&L's proposed expansion at the Shearon Harris Nuclear Plant, which would create the nation's only four-pool waste storage site.

Although NRC insiders say efforts were made to "sugar-coat" the report, the final version is even more damaging to the nuclear industry than a draft released last February. That earlier version touched off criticism by the NRC's own science advisors, who argued that the agency was seriously underestimating various aspects of waste pool risks. The study also bolsters Orange County's claim that a careful and open examination of CP&L's planned expansion is vital, requiring formal safety hearings and an environmental impact study.

The NRC study, released yesterday, reflects nine threats considered by the NRC, and indicates that the risk from "spent" fuel pools is higher than earlier believed – but is below the NRC "safety goal." However, David Lochbaum, Nuclear Safety Engineer at the Union of Concerned Scientists, said today that the safety goal conclusion is based on a list of 10 conditions that the NRC admits are probably not being met at any U.S. plants. Without all those conditions, the risk increases by at least a factor of 10, according to the study.

Lochbaum also noted that despite the results, he is concerned that the analysis ignores the threat of sabotage or terrorism, which could lead to a waste pool fire and, if properly considered, would cause the risk to increase substantially. He said that years of NRC mock-invasions have shown nuclear plants have a 50% failure rate in security. "The NRC doesn't know how to quantify the terrorist threat, but the Oklahoma City bombing suggests that the odds are not zero."

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While excluding terrorism in risk calculations, the NRC found that terrorists could more easily cause a waste pool accident than a reactor accident. Environmental group NC WARN argues that becoming the nation's largest storage site would increase the chance that Shearon Harris would be targeted.

If waste pools lose cooling water – due to earthquake, off-site power loss caused by weather, a dropped waste cask, or terrorism – or if water stops moving long enough to boil away, the exposure of waste bundles to air can cause them to ignite, potentially releasing large amounts of radiation into the atmosphere with little chance of stopping the accident after it begins.

Although the study focuses on retired nuclear plants, pools at operating plants are even more dangerous because irradiated fuel assemblies are hottest when first discharged from the reactors, according to Lochbaum, a 17-year nuclear industry consultant and author of a 1996 book on spent fuel storage. Among other conclusions, the study found that health damage from a waste accident would be at least 30 times higher if evacuation of the surrounding population were not carried out rapidly.

"We believe this will bolster Sen. John Edwards and Rep. David Price to become even more involved," said NC WARN Director Jim Warren today. "Central North Carolina simply cannot be left to live under a cloud of scientific uncertainty with CP&L's massive nuclear stockpile hovering over us." The group and a coalition of local citizens and students are demanding full safety hearings and have resorted to nonviolent civil disobedience because CP&L has spent an estimated \$2 million to prevent the hearings.

Edwards and Price recently questioned the NRC's actions after a high-level staff official with the agency – under CP&L pressure – granted approval of CP&L's expansion while an NRC licensing board is considering Orange County's argument that safety hearings and the environmental study are required by law. Orange County has appealed to the full NRC panel, with a decision expected any day.

While all sides agree that the radiation released from a waste pool accident could equal or exceed a reactor accident, the nuclear industry points to the absence of any serious waste pool accidents to date as proof that the probability of a disaster is very low. But two U.S. nuclear plants, in Iowa and Alabama, recently lost cooling for two days without being detected, with temperatures rising to system-damaging levels. A near-miss occurred at CP&L's Brunswick plant in March 2000 after a loss of primary and back-up cooling for a reactor and waste pool.

Since 1979, Dr. Gordon Thompson, one of Orange County's consultants, has argued that partial drainage of waste pools is more dangerous than a total loss of water. The NRC finally agrees, and says partial drainage is the most likely mechanism for an accident and that the probability cannot be discounted.

Thompson and Lochbaum, who also has assisted Orange, argue that dry storage of the waste – although not risk-free – would greatly diminish the risk of a catastrophic accident. In December, a utility president argued repeatedly that dry storage is safer.

In a curious twist, the nuclear industry's lobbying group submitted formal comments on the new study on Jan. 10th – a full week before the study was released. Warren laughed that this is yet another example of the cozy relationship between the NRC and the industry it regulates: "They're so used to having their way, they apparently forget sometimes that the public might be watching them."

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* This news release is based on a review of the NRC study by David Lochbaum of the Union of Concerned Scientists. UCS will provide a more detailed analysis of the study soon, and will make a formal presentation to the NRC Commission on February 20th.

The NRC study can be found at
<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/REACTOR/DECOMMISSIONING/SF/index.html>

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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

In the Matter of)	
)	
CAROLINA POWER & LIGHT COMPANY)	Docket No. 50-400-LA
)	
(Shearon Harris Nuclear Power Plant))	

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I hereby certify that copies of the foregoing LIMITED APPEARANCE STATEMENT OF NC WARN DATED 01/18/2001 have been served upon the following persons by U.S. mail, first class, or through NRC internal distribution.

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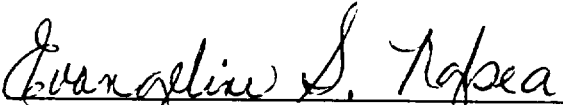
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Docket No. 50-400-LA
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OF NC WARN 01/18/2001


Office of the Secretary of the Commission

Dated at Rockville, Maryland,
this 19th day of January 2001