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CONTACT: Roger Hannah 404-997-4417
Joey Ledford 404-997-4416

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NRC Begins Special Inspection at Global Nuclear Fuel in Wilmington

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff is beginning a special inspection at the Global Nuclear Fuel facility in Wilmington, N.C., to review the circumstances surrounding the discovery in late March that some safety equipment was unavailable or unreliable.

On March 28, plant employees determined that a moisture sensor that is one of the facility's criticality controls was not operable. A pressure indicator in the same system that would have also helped prevent a criticality was later found to be in a condition that made it unreliable.

A criticality can occur when nuclear materials come together in sufficient quantity or arrangement to initiate a chain reaction resulting in either a "burst" or a sustained release of radiation. Moisture can also play a role in a criticality. A criticality event would not be expected to affect people or the environment outside the facility, but could be serious for workers in the immediate area.

"While there was no actual unsafe condition, our inspectors will make sure that we fully understand the potential safety significance associated with the equipment problems," said Victor McCree, NRC Region II administrator.

There will be three inspectors on site for the special inspection, from the NRC's fuel facility division in the Region II office in Atlanta and the agency's headquarters in Rockville, Md. The team will review the facts surrounding the equipment issues, the company's actions after the condition was discovered and any long-term corrective actions to prevent recurrence.

The on-site portion of the inspection will take several days. A report documenting the results should be issued within 45 days of the completion of the inspection.