

Nuclear Power | 25.07.2008

Series of French Radiation Leaks Raise New Safety Concerns



Too many workers in France's nuclear power facilities are being exposed to low doses of radiation, an independent commission found. Power companies also admitted security procedures needed to be revamped.

Experts are concerned by the number of incidents that have occurred recently in France

The Independent Commission on Research and Information on Radiocactivity (CRIIRAD) said on Thursday, July 24, that a growing number of French nuclear workers were complaining about worsening working conditions and their likely impact on safety.

"In less than 15 days, the CRIIRAD has been informed of four malfunctions in four nuclear plants, leading to the accidental contamination of 126 workers," CRIIRAD head Corinne Castanier told Reuters news agency. "This is the first time I have seen so many people being contaminated in such a short period of time."

Inspectors found that 100 people were "slightly" contaminated near the French nuclear plant Tricastin on Wednesday in the second incident at that plant this month.

Radioactive elements leaked from a hose. The nuclear regulatory authority (ASN) categorized the incident as level "0" on the international 0 to 7-point scale used to rate nuclear incidents. The director of the plant, Alain Peckre, described the incident as "inconsequential."

EDF said workers were exposed to radiation far below permitted levels, and were able to return home after undergoing medical checks.

Series of French radiation leaks



Authorities were alerted to the second incident in Tricastin a day after it happened

The CRIIRAD, however, criticized French state-owned nuclear operator EDF for saying the latest contamination incident had no impact on people's health or on the environment because the radiation doses were below the regulatory limits set by international standards.

"The regulatory limits for radiation ... do not mean there is no risk but relate to a maximum risk level that can be permitted," the CRIIRAD said in a note published on its Web site on Thursday, according to Reuters.

On July 7, some 75 kilograms (165.35 pounds) of radioactive uranium leaked out of the Tricastin nuclear power plant and into two nearby creeks.

The next day people living near the Tricastin site were told not to drink water or eat fish from nearby rivers after liquid uranium from the nuclear plant polluted the local water supply.

On July 18 nuclear safety authorities said a broken pipe at another nuclear fuel plant in southeast France had caused a radioactive leak but no damage to the environment.

After that incident French nuclear safety authorities and the nuclear group Areva admitted that security for nuclear power in France needed revamping.

Looking into the consequences

The incidents have led some in France to question the country's dependence on nuclear energy. At the same time, President Nicolas Sarkozy says he wants to expand France's use of nuclear power. Some 80 percent of the country's energy needs are supplied by 59 nuclear reactors in 19 locations.



Over three-fourths of French energy is produced by nuclear power plants

groundwater.

DW staff (sms)

French environmental groups have pointed to the recent incidents as reason to curtail nuclear energy.

"This new incident shows that nuclear energy, which is presented as clean and safe, remains a dangerous, polluting and poorly controlled energy," a spokesman for environmental group Greenpeace told the AFP news agency.

Last Thursday, Environment Minister Jean-Louis Borloo called for an inspection of all of France's reactors and the surrounding