

Report adds to doubts about Davis-Besse

This was a very serious condition but not an accident even though it might have become one.

Lancaster Eagle-Gazette
September 28, 2004

It's official, but hardly surprising. The extensive corrosion found on the reactor head at the Davis-Besse Nuclear Power Station officially has been rated among the top five most serious accidents or near-accidents since Three Mile Island, according to a Nuclear Regulatory Commission report.

NRC staff reported that there was a six in 1,000 chance that the plant could have had a meltdown in the year before it was shut down for routine maintenance in February 2002. The normal risk is six in 100,000, according to an NRC spokesman.

Soon after the shutdown began, Davis-Besse workers discovered the corrosion on the reactor head. Leaking boric acid had eaten away a football-size chunk of carbon steel, leaving only a thin layer of stainless steel to keep radioactive coolant water inside the reactor. Later still, investigators determined that the stainless steel cladding also was bulging at the spot of the corrosion, indicating that the intense pressure of the coolant water system was straining the spot.

Now, in order for a meltdown to occur, other safety systems would have had to fail as well. But during the shutdown, investigators figured that an undersized sump in the containment building could have been clogged during an accident, possibly stopping the flow of water to cooling pumps.

Richard Wilkins, a spokesman for Davis-Besse owner FirstEnergy, noted that the NRC analysis assumed that all pumps and safety systems would have failed, which is unlikely, according to an Associated Press report.

In the past, we've been highly critical of the NRC and FirstEnergy for their response to the Davis-Besse problems and -- in some cases -- their comments that seemed to downplay the danger that the corrosion posed.

In the AP story last week, Wilkins also said that the conditions at the plant were unacceptable. He's right, and we're happy that there's less of a spin being put on reports on the problems.

In the meantime, another report last week found that the NRC has not done a good job in responding to lessons it learns from incidents like the one at Davis-Besse. The agency's report finds many of the same problems that were outlined in a review earlier this year from the General Accounting Office.

Agency leaders had complained about the findings of the GAO report, but now are changing their tune. It's about time, but questions still remain about whether the NRC is capable of changing the way it operates.