



NRC NEWS

U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

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No. 06-075

May 31, 2006

NRC'S REVISED DIFFERING PROFESSIONAL OPINIONS PROGRAM ASSESSED

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, an agency committed to promoting safety culture among its staff and licensees, has released a comprehensive assessment of its Differing Professional Opinions (DPO) Program, including a review of cases filed and employee perceptions of the program.

The report, issued by the NRC's Office of Enforcement, covers the period from May 2004, when the program was revised, until the end of last year. It also addresses employee concerns about the program identified by the agency's 2005 Safety Climate and Culture Survey. The results of that survey were released in February. The DPO program assessment details the performance of the program and how it is perceived by agency employees. The assessment identifies specific issues and recommendations for each of the program's performance objectives.

"The DPO Program is an important part of the NRC's effort to ensure that all employees and contractors feel free to express their views on issues related to the agency's mission and strategic goals, including safety, security, openness, effectiveness, and management, and that agency decision makers have access to a wide range of information and opinions on these matters," said Renée Pedersen, who has managed the program since it was revamped two years ago and placed within the Office of Enforcement.

During the period covered by the assessment, the NRC accepted nine DPOs from members of the staff. Two of those were closed by the end of 2005 and resulted in improvements in agency procedures. One was subsequently withdrawn and six remained under consideration at the end of 2005. Two additional submissions were returned as premature because the issues raised were still undergoing staff review.

One of the two DPO cases closed by the end of 2005 resulted in additional planned improvements to the NRC's evaluation of licensee performance during force-on-force exercises at nuclear power plants. Such evaluations will now include additional performance assessment tools to help identify areas for improvement, in addition to focusing on whether the security force successfully defended the target sets. The second closed DPO case questioned whether NRC staff had adequately reviewed the Oconee nuclear plant's fatigue analysis for pipe whip restraints. Although the review panel concluded that the staff's review was appropriate, it recommended improvements to the agency's significance determination process and, further, that the pipe whip restraint issue be revisited in a future inspection.

The assessment report is available in the NRC's ADAMS document management system at <http://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/adams/web-based.html> by entering accession number "ML061370538" in the search window.

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