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NORTH CAROLINA'S RADIATION PROTECTION PROGRAM RECEIVES HIGHEST APPROVAL RATING FROM THE U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

RALEIGH – North Carolina's Radioactive Materials Program has received the highest rating awarded by federal reviewers, who evaluated the program's ability to protect public health and safety and its compatibility with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's program standards.

The NRC deemed the program, administered in the N.C. Division of Environmental Health's Radiation Protection Section, satisfactory, the top highest rating an agreement state program can receive. The NRC evaluates the state's Radioactive Materials Program every four years.

"Receiving a rating of satisfactory means the North Carolina program is doing a wonderful job ensuring the health and safety of all North Carolinians with regards to radiation safety," Terry Pierce, DEH division director, said. "This program continues to accomplish all of the federally-mandated requirements that make it a top-notch program."

The NRC evaluated the N.C. Agreement State program in August 2004. The evaluation team looked at five common performance indicators, common to all agreement states; and three non-common performance indicators, specific to North Carolina's program. The indicators are listed below:

Common Performance Indicators

- Technical staffing and training,
- Status of materials inspection program,
- Technical quality of inspections,
- Technical quality of licensing actions and
- Technical quality of incident and allegation activities.

Non-Common Performance Indicators

- Legislation,
- Sealed Source and Device (SS&D) evaluation program and
- Low-level radioactive waste disposal program.

The North Carolina Agreement Program regulates approximately 751 specifically licensed radioactive material facilities. It is among only 33 other Agreement States in the nation. Program staff license, inspect and monitor all radioactive material activities within the state.

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The NRC review determined program staff to be well-qualified based on the education and training criteria. This staff is extremely responsive to inspection findings, licensing actions, incidents and allegations, according to the report, which read, "The inspectors were well prepared and thorough in their reviews of the licensees' radiation safety programs. The inspections were adequate to assess radiological health and safety at the licensed facility."

It goes on to state that the licensing actions were thorough, complete, consistent and of high quality with health and safety issues properly addressed.

"North Carolina may very well be the best in the country in regards to its radioactive materials program," Pierce said. "In the last eight months approximately 562 licensing actions have been completed in an average of 12.5 days. Also program staff respond to about one radiological incident per week, and North Carolina has a long-standing record of conducting radioactive material inspections at a higher frequency than mandated by the NRC."

North Carolina is one of 25 states that have retained a sealed source and device evaluation program. Serving both as an incentive for relocating manufacturing companies and a worldwide safety measure, the state's SS&D program ensures that radioactive devices manufactured in North Carolina meet rigorous safety standards. Once a device passes the evaluation and a registration sheet has been issued, the device is eligible for licensing anywhere in the nation. North Carolina fees for radioactive device evaluations are lower than those charged by the federal government. This, coupled with the state's lower licensing fees, translates to lower regulatory costs for manufacturers in North Carolina.

"The Sealed Source and Device program was instituted in this state many years ago. It is important to our manufacturers, so, it is important to the state," Pierce said.

The U.S. NRC is headquartered in Rockville, Md, and is the leading agency on regulating radioactive materials in the country. In 1964, North Carolina entered into an agreement with the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, now the NRC, to regulate all use of radioactive material in non-federally regulated facilities. To determine if Agreement States were meeting its standards, the NRC developed a means to evaluate them in 1994; the system that was developed – Integrated Materials Performance Evaluation Program – is the evaluation mechanism still used today.

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