

Officials Cite Few Problems During Nuclear Accident Drill

BY TERRY POPE

For six hours last Wednesday evening, emergency workers scrambled about the sheriff's department in Bolivia, conducting an evacuation due to a "radiation leak" at the Brunswick Nuclear Plant in Southport.

The exercise was just a simulated drill, but hardly just for fun. Practice helps prepare emergency workers for the real thing, and last Wednesday's practice drill included all the ingredients of a real nuclear accident.

In the end, those in charge of the Carolina Power and Light Company practice drill were pleased with how well the exercise was carried out, except for one apparent breakdown in communications.

"As far as the response of the people of Brunswick County, as far as going with our plan, I don't think it could have gone any better than it did," said Cecil Logan, Brunswick County Emergency Management Coordinator.

Logan said a breakdown in communications between the state and CP&L officials presented the only drawback during the drill. Part-way through the six-hour exercise, CP&L officials began "assuming that the state had taken over at one point," Logan said. "At that point, they quit calling the locals with information. The state had not assumed control at any point."

What resulted was a delay before both Brunswick and New Hanover County Emergency Operation Centers (EOC) received any information following an alert call from the plant. Officials at the EOCs knew that two seismic activities had occurred, which were reported at 7:35 p.m. and 8:25 p.m.

From there, a 35- to 40-minute blackout of news resulted from the communications breakdown while emergency workers at the EOCs began to wonder about the situation at the plant.

"I don't think you can single out any individuals," Logan said. "Everyone was doing what they thought they were supposed to be doing."

The Scenario

The simulated incident began at 6:42 p.m. Wednesday when an "unusual event," the lowest category of accident recognized by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, was noted at the Brunswick Nuclear Plant. According to Brunswick County Public Information Officer David Clegg, a seismic event was recorded at the plant registering .09 g, with a "good possibility of a possible crack in a wall at the CP&L plant."

An ambulance from Southport was dispatched to the plant after one worker was injured while trying to put out a fire in a contained area. The worker was transported to Dasher Memorial Hospital in Southport for decontamination.



STAFF PHOTO BY TERRY POPE

COUNTY ATTORNEY DAVID CLEGG, County Manager Billy Carter and Health Director Thomas Blum (not visible) and Emergency Management Coordinator Cecil Logan chart the progress of the drill at the Emergency Operations Center at Bolivia last Wednesday night.

tion. He was reported in stable condition at 9:30 p.m.

A fire in a protected area of the plant was also reported at 6:42 p.m., but at 8:25 p.m. another earthquake, stronger than the first, was reported, sending the plant into an "site area emergency" state.

With that, Logan opened the EOC office in Bolivia and began calling in emergency personnel. Clegg

reported that Unit 1 at the plant had automatically shut down, while Unit 2 was in the process of being shut down.

"Sheriff, I'm going to need some traffic control at three points," Logan stated at an 8:37 p.m. briefing. "In the event we have to evacuate, we need to keep all traffic moving in the same direction."

By then, Brunswick County Commissioners Chris

Chappell, Grace Beasley and Jim Poole were also called to the EOC, along with Health Director Thomas Blum, Social Services Acting Director Betty Varnum, school Transportation Supervisor Bill Turner, County Manager Billy Carter, American Red Cross representative Wayne Pearce, Salvation Army representatives and other volunteers.

A state of "general alert" was declared by the plant at 10:08 p.m. when it was noted that a "main stream isolation valve failed to shut down," Clegg said. "Due to prevailing wind conditions, residents in areas A, B, C, and D are being asked to remain indoors with their doors and windows closed and to turn off their air conditioning systems. Residents in all other areas are being asked to evacuate."

The valve malfunction involved the "potential for radioactive release, but there is no release at this time," a news release from CP&L stated at 10:08 p.m.

An evacuation shelter was opened at North Brunswick High School in Leland while five other schools were placed on stand-by.

Emergency sirens along a 10-mile radius of the plant and the Emergency Broadcast System were activated simultaneously in Brunswick and New Hanover counties at 10:22 p.m. "I love to see a plan come together," Logan said while listening to the EBS notification on the radio. "Do not be alarmed by the sirens," the EBS broadcast stated. "No action by the public is necessary."

At 10:40 p.m. another CP&L release stated that high levels of radioactivity had been recorded in the plant's turbine building due to a steam leak. Unit 2 was still operating, it stated.

"There is indication of some damage to the nuclear fuel at the Brunswick plant," Clegg reported, "and there is a low level of radioactivity being released to the environment."

By 10:15 p.m., decontamination stations had been established at two sites by the Boiling Spring Lakes and Bolivia Volunteer Fire Departments.

Clegg said it should take approximately one hour and 20 minutes to evacuate the affected areas.

By 11:20 p.m., there was good news. The reactor was cooling down at the Brunswick plant and the prognosis was improving.

At midnight, the situation at the plant was secured with no casualties and no melt down. Evacuees and emergency personnel began returning home shortly after midnight.

Nuclear Response Team Always Ready 'To Roll'

For 16 people from New Hill, a small town just outside Apex where the Shearon Harris Nuclear Power Plant is located, simulated emergency drills occur at least three times each year.

These 16 Carolina Power and Light Co. employees are members of the nuclear emergency response team that is always ready to roll, 24 hours a day, to the site of any nuclear accident to conduct tests for radioactivity.

"Fortunately, we haven't had a real situation," said Jim Peersall, "but we do have at least three simulated drills each year."

Inside the Carolina blue tractor-trailer rig is a complete nuclear laboratory equipped with computerized monitors and gamma and alpha radiation detectors. When its doors are shut and sealed, about three inches of heavy plated walls protect the laboratory from the outside environment, which could affect

the tests for radioactivity in a genuine emergency.

"You're looking at approximately \$400,000 in state-of-the-art equipment," said Dan Cahill, a member of the emergency response team. Cahill and others who work with the Emergency Operating Facility (EOF) are environmental specialists for CP&L when there are no simulated drills in progress.

"We get routine samples every week for testing," Cahill said. "That's what our duty is, to test for radioactivity."

While Brunswick County officials conducted the simulated nuclear accident drill at the government complex in Bolivia last Wednesday evening, members of the CP&L EOF were parked in the corner of the lot just 200 feet away, conducting their own tests as part of the drill.

The blue van and response team are part of every drill involving a CP&L plant. The state also conducts

tests for radioactivity in the event of a real emergency situation.

The EOF is stationed at New Hill and is always ready to relocate to the site of an emergency situation, Cahill said. If an accident were to occur, CP&L officials would begin collecting samples from the area. The EOF would already be enroute. "So by the time the sample is ready for us, we'd be ready for it," Cahill said.

The men never know where they will be instructed to station the EOF during a drill.

In a genuine emergency, they would never know how close they could actually get to the plant itself until the situation is assessed.

The system is equipped with a generator and can be operated on any level site. Parked in the corner of the lot at the complex last Wednesday, the EOF may have resembled a set from a science fiction movie, but its job was for real.



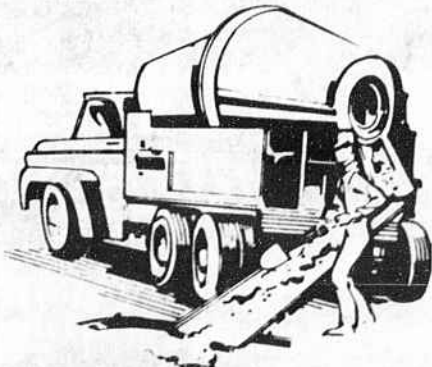
STAFF PHOTO BY TERRY POPE

JIM PEARSALL, shown here in a mobile laboratory set up near the Brunswick Nuclear plant, is one of 16 environmental specialists with the CP&L Emergency

Operations Facility who respond at least three times yearly to simulated nuclear accident drills at CP&L plants.

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