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Regulators consider whether to allow San Onofre nuclear waste to be stored in defective Holtec storage system

Regulators consider allowing loading of highly radioactive nuclear fuel waste into Holtec thin-wall storage canisters at San Onofre to resume despite warnings that the storage canisters are likely damaged by the Holtec loading system. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission admits the Holtec design flaws cannot be fixed, so all 44 additional canisters that Southern California Edison plans to load are likely to be damaged. Confirming the degree of damage seems impossible, however, because the canisters cannot be inspected – much less repaired – once they are loaded into the dry storage vault, officials say in meeting records.

After the Jan. 24 public meeting with Southern California Edison, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission plans to make a decision as to whether the loading of defective canisters can continue.

The transfer of nuclear waste at the shuttered San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station into the oceanfront storage system was halted after a near-accident on Aug. 3 in which a 54-ton canister of nuclear waste came within a quarter-inch of falling 18 feet as it was being lowered into a storage hole.

At that point, workers had lowered 29 of the thin-walled, steel canisters into the oceanfront vault. Southern California Edison and its contractor, Holtec International, plan to transfer an additional 44 canisters into the vault.

"It is important to note, these Holtec engineering design problems cannot be fixed with training and procedures. The Holtec HI-STORM UMAX system is seriously flawed and the NRC should be held responsible for not citing Holtec accordingly. Both Holtec and SCE must be held accountable for this defective and unsafe Holtec system. Alarmingly, this conference is only addressing SCE's role in these safety problems," states Rear Admiral Len Hering Sr. (USN ret)

"Admittedly neither the NRC, SCE or Holtec have a plan in place should something go wrong with the canisters. Worse, the NRC falsely assumes nothing will go wrong. That is an assumption that should never be presumed. Unfortunately, by their own actions, we should no longer trust the NRC, SCE and most importantly Holtec to protect our safety.", states Hering.

"The only option SCE has left us with is to replace this defective Holtec HI-STORM UMAX system with a proven thick-wall dry storage cask system", states Donna Gilmore, SanOnofreSafety.org.

During the transfer, these 50+ ton canisters scrape against guide rings as they are lowered, causing gouging which can shorten the life of the canisters and lead to leaks and explosions.

The nuclear industry is "*trying* to develop techniques to be able to inspect…casks in service," Nuclear Regulatory Commission inspector Christian Araguas told commissioners during an October 2018 meeting. "I *think* we have confidence in the industry and the direction they're going to be able to inspect these in the future."

In his testimony, Araguas does not identify what future solutions might look like or when they would be available. However, this problem has existed for decades.

Later, during a public webinar hosted by the NRC on Nov. 8, NRC health physicist Eric Simpson downplayed the significance of gouged canisters.

"We *think* (Edison) would have time to develop a repair strategy, and if it required removal of the canister, it would be able to do that, they'd have plenty of time to do that before there was a significant impact on the canister," Simpson said.

In January, the Samuel Lawrence Foundation published a study, San Onofre Nuclear Waste Problems, which concludes "extensive gouging" likely occurs during routine loading.

While the regulators say they cannot inspect damaged canisters, the president of Holtec International says it is "not practical" to try to repair them, even if you could find cracks.

"My personal position is a canister that develops a microscopic crack, to precisely locate it itself it is a tall order and then if you try to repair it...you create a rough surface which becomes a new creation site for corrosion down the road," Holtec President Kris Singh said during a community meeting in 2014. "I, as a pragmatic technical solution, I don't advocate repairing the canister."

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