Media handling: Contamination event at Hinkley Point B Power Station on 16th July 2009

This briefing relates to a contamination event at Hinkley Point B Nuclear Power Station, part of British Energy Generation Limited, which occurred on 16th July 2009. We are not carrying out any pro-active communication on this matter, as the regulatory action taken by HSE has been to send a letter; nor will we put this statement on the HSE website. There has been some external interest in the event, hence this information is provided for use on a reactive basis only.

Statement for the media (if requested)

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) confirms that an incident occurred at Hinkley Point B Nuclear Power Station on 16 July this year, when a quantity of radioactive dust was released from the Reactor 3 gas circuit into the gas bypass plant area. As a result 8 workers became contaminated. The individuals concerned were independently assessed to determine the level of exposure to ionising radiations. The maximum level of exposure was estimated as 0.059mSv, which may be compared with the annual dose limit of 20mSv permitted for a radiation worker.

No release of activity to the environment was reported.

HSE has written to British Energy requiring improvements to the arrangements for the control and supervision of work, particularly where contractors are involved during periodic shutdown. HSE will monitor the situation and follow-up inspections are planned.

Q&A (to be used only if asked)

What happened?
On 16 July 2009 a quantity of radioactive dust was released from the Reactor 3 gas circuit into the gas bypass plant area. The total activity released was relatively low, being some 20MBq. Reactor 3 was under periodic shutdown at the time and contained air at approximately atmospheric pressure. Work was being undertaken to replace a ball valve in the gas bypass circuit under so called “open hole” conditions. The spread of any possible contamination from within the reactor coolant gas circuit is prevented under these conditions by ensuring that sufficient negative air pressure is maintained within the reactor. During the operation, the reactor conditions were changed resulting in a quantity of radioactive dust being released from pipework within the gas bypass system.

How many people were affected by it?
The total of 8 workers became contaminated. The individuals concerned were independently assessed to determine the level of exposure to ionising radiations. The maximum level of exposure was estimated as 0.059mSv, which may be compared with the annual dose limit of 20mSv permitted for a radiation worker. There was no release of radioactive material to the environment reported.

Why did it happen?
A HSE investigation found that there were a number of contributory factors leading up to the event, but that the underlying cause was a lack of adequate control and supervision of the work activity. Safety was reliant on a system of work which was not properly specified, controlled and supervised. A key factor was the poor coordination between British Energy and contractors used to perform the work.

Why is HSE not prosecuting the company over the incident?
HSE has sent at letter to Hinkley Point B Nuclear Power Station, requiring improvements to the arrangements for control and supervision of contractors. HSE has also required that Hinkley Point B address other areas for improvement to prevent a similar incident occurring. HSE considers that this is the most appropriate course of action consistent with the HSE Enforcement Policy Statement. HSE has also taken into account the previous safety record the duty holder.

What further action will HSE take?
HSE will monitor the site to ensure that the required improvements are made. HSE has also taken steps to ensure that BE fleet wide arrangements for the management of contractors takes on board any lessons learnt.