

Three Mile Island

Accusations abound as inquiries proliferate

Washington

THE General Public Utilities Corporation (GPU), owner of Three Mile Island, has responded defiantly to a Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) report which accuses the company of violating safety procedures in its haste to salvage the damaged reactor. In an unusually forthright public statement, GPU has dismissed the NRC findings as "misleading" and promised to release the findings of an independent inquiry which characterizes the violations as minor procedural hiccoughs with no impact on safety.

NRC launched a special investigation into the Three Mile Island clean-up last March after three employees at the site complained that GPU and its principal contractor, the Bechtel Corporation, were flouting NRC-approved procedures in order to stick to an unrealistic timetable for cleaning up the damaged reactor. The commission's interim report, published last month, said the complaints were substantially true and may have been only the tip of an iceberg.

NRC's list of rule violations at the site is extensive. The detailed procedures for checking equipment and monitoring safety were not observed and senior staff managing the clean-up did not have the technical qualifications for the job. Most importantly, Bechtel Corporation ignored a swathe of tests and procedures that should have been observed before refurbishing the reactor building polar crane — a crucial item of equipment that will eventually be used to lift the reactor head as a prelude to defuelling.

GPU does not quarrel with most of these findings but it does challenge their significance. Most of the infractions, the company insists, were honest mistakes caused by the complexity of the rules and the fact that, at the time complained of, the management structure at the site was being extensively overhauled. In any case, it argues, none of the violations had any direct safety consequences.

The company's argument is supported by the initial findings of another inquiry, conducted at GPU's request by Edwin Stier, former head of New Jersey's criminal justice division and now a private lawyer. In a preview of his report, Stier accuses NRC management of jumping to "very sweeping conclusions" that are not justified by the findings of its own investigation.

Stier complains that the NRC investigation restricted itself to the narrow question of whether approved procedures were followed to the letter but did not ask whether failure to do so resulted in any

danger to health and safety. His conclusion is that it did not. In the case of the polar crane, for example, Stier maintains that, contrary to NRC findings, a crucial load test was carried out effectively even though it did not conform with NRC requirements. More importantly, Stier concludes that none of the rule violations was a deliberate attempt to cut corners on safety.

NRC's report acknowledges that some of the difficulties at the site can be attributed to honest confusion. One particularly disruptive problem is that the damaged reactor is still considered an operating unit for NRC purposes, whereas Bechtel Corporation has relatively little experience of working with NRC operating procedures. But the head of the NRC investigation team warns in the report that attempting to work around procedures viewed as cumbersome is a recipe for safety errors.

GPU's strong rejection of the NRC report is understandable in light of pressure on the company to prove its competence and integrity before it is allowed to restart the undamaged Unit 1 reactor at Three Mile Island. But NRC has not yet finished its investigation of one of the most damaging allegations made against the company — that it harassed and intimidated the employees who first complained about the violations.

Stier's report sidesteps the thorny issue

of whether the main whistleblower, Richard Parks, was harassed. Parks, the report says, was employed by Bechtel rather than GPU. But it dismisses the allegations of three GPU employees who say they were punished for speaking out. One, Stier claims, was dismissed because of a conflict of interest: while employed as site director he ran a consulting firm that used GPU personnel. Another misconstrued as harassment the genuine efforts of a company psychiatrist to persuade him to undergo tests to assess the consequences of a stroke. The allegations of a third were "without basis".

NRC investigators may reach different conclusions. A Department of Labor inquiry has already upheld Parks's claims of harassment. A third opinion may emerge from yet another inquiry, to be conducted by retired Admiral Hyman Rickover, former head of nuclear propulsion for the US Navy. Rickover has agreed to a GPU request to assess the company's overall management competence but has said nothing about the scope of his inquiry.

Meanwhile, NRC itself has reason to be embarrassed by its investigators' conclusions. Although the report rejects allegations that NRC personnel at Three Mile Island colluded in the harassment of the whistleblowers, it confirms suggestions that the commission's supervisory office at the site enjoyed too cosy a relationship with Bechtel and GPU. In particular, the commission's programme office at Three Mile Island was apparently aware that GPU was not forcing Bechtel to follow regular procedures, but failed to intervene because it saw these difficulties as "internal conflicts".

Peter David

Personal disputes at Three Mile Island

THE chief evidence provoking the most recent inquiry into events at Three Mile Island was an affidavit by Richard D. Parks sworn in March this year. His general assertion is that the management cut corners "to meet unrealistic time schedules" and that people like him "faced pressure, intimidation and retaliation".

Among Mr Parks's allegations of intimidation are the following:

- At a meeting in January 1983 at which he explained why he could not approve of certain steps that had been taken, he was told by a superior that "instead of telling what we can't do", he should "tell what we can do". He alleges that the same superior told another afterwards that he should be warned of his "negative" attitude.

- After the site operations staff had refused to sign a document acknowledging that a disputed lifting crane had been properly refurbished, a superior asked him "What the hell are you doing? You have upper management pissed off at you to the point where I've been asked what has to be done to get you transferred off site."

- On the evening of 10 March, another supervisor had telephoned a friend to say that he was worried about Parks because "my wife was trying to get some dirt on me that could be used to take away custody of my children". The Parks affidavit explains that while he is widely thought to have been divorced, in reality he is a widower.

- After a colleague Larry King had been fired from the Three Mile Island team on the grounds that he had run a private consultancy, Parks says that he was interviewed by two Bechtel executives who sought to implicate him in this operation. Parks, who denies involvement, says that at a meeting the following day at which a Bechtel vice-president, Mr. C. Sanford, was present, he was accused of having helped the consultancy and that he was told that he could be "fired" on that account.

- One of Parks's most serious allegations is that his anxieties about safety procedures were communicated to Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials on a confidential basis but then passed on to utility officials and their source could be identified. □