

DOE Fines Operator of Savannah River Site

For Immediate Release

Release Date: December 8, 1997

WASHINGTON, DC The Department of Energy has taken two enforcement actions against Westinghouse Savannah River Co., the operator of the Savannah River Site in Aiken SC, for violations of nuclear safety rules.

The first Preliminary Notice of Violation (PNOV) is accompanied by a \$93,750 fine and involves the contractor's failure to follow work control procedures designed to protect workers from radiation exposure. The violations were revealed during investigations of a December 1996 uptake of plutonium by a crane operator doing decontamination work in the F-canyon reprocessing plant. The worker received a dose more than twice the five rem annual limit for the whole body and four times the 50 rem annual limit to the bone surface. The worker's exposure was identified in a routine review of his bioassay samples in April 1997.

Subsequent investigations by DOE and Westinghouse established that the plutonium exposure resulted from multiple failures to follow work planning and control procedures designed to limit radiation exposures to F-Canyon workers. For example, radiation protection personnel did not initiate timely evacuation of workers when high levels of airborne radioactivity were identified.

On other occasions the contractor failed to properly use physical design features, such as a primary containment structure to limit the spread of contamination or air monitoring equipment to detect high levels of airborne radioactivity in a timely manner. Both DOE and the Westinghouse internal investigations concluded that inadequate oversight by management left these problems largely unnoticed and uncorrected.

In a previous November 24, 1997 enforcement action, DOE issued a separate PNOV (without civil penalty) to Westinghouse Savannah River Co. for its failure to assure the quality of safety grade nitrogen components purchased from a subcontractor. The components were installed in the Defense Waste Processing Facility to prevent potential for inadvertent combustion. After eight months of operation, welds on one of the components cracked and began to leak and, upon inspection, similar welds in the remaining components were found to be inadequate.

DOE found that the safety grade components were operated without adequate inspection or evaluation, even though the contractor had previously identified quality problems. DOE classified these violations at Severity Level III (the lowest level violation) after determining that, while the problems should have been corrected prior

to installation in the facility, the violations did not pose an immediate and serious safety problem.

Westinghouse is required to respond to each of the PNOVS and document specific actions to prevent recurrence. DOE will review the corrective actions and determine whether further enforcement actions are necessary.

Both Preliminary Notices of Violation were issued under authority of the Price Anderson Amendments Act that directed the Department to develop and enforce nuclear rules on its contractors. Since the program began in January 1996, the Department has issued 19 Notices of Violation and nine civil penalties totaling \$415,000. These actions represent the first formal enforcement actions involving Westinghouse Savannah River.

Copies of each of the PNOVs and supporting documents are available through the Internet on <http://www.hss.energy.gov/enforce>.