

Sellafield: the safety crisis

A summary of statements from the BNFL Environment, Health & Safety Report 1998/99, "Responsible for safety and care for the environment", and the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate (NII) Investigation of Sellafield (6-27 September 1999), published February 2000.

BNFL says:	NII says:
<p>"Our vision is to become the leading global nuclear company, with the priority of achieving world-class standards in safety and plant operations."</p>	<p>"...in the implementation of the Sellafield Safety Regulations, we consider that generally the standard of achievement across the site is only just tolerable."</p> <p>"...BNFL's arrangements for ensuring that plants are operated within the constraints of the safety case, and in line with appropriate instructions, are generally only just tolerable."</p>
<p>"The safety and welfare of all our employees, the general public and protection of the environment are paramount in all our operations. Considerable resources are devoted to achieving and maintaining high radiological and conventional safety standards."</p>	<p>"...we consider the resources which the Corporate Director of Safety, Health and Environment commands are insufficient both in numbers and expertise."</p> <p>"...in a number of areas it is clear that the reduction in staff numbers had gone too far..."</p> <p>"...skills shortages have been identified in some areas...We found that in some areas vacancies had existed for a long time...We consider this to be an unsatisfactory situation and demonstrates the continuing weakness of a business area-focused rather than a site-focused resource strategy."</p> <p>"...there are insufficient resources to implement even the existing safety management system."</p>

"Safety first: We consider that none of our activities are more important than the health and safety of our employees, contractors, the general public and the protection of the environment."

"In discussions with a range of managers it was obvious that site- and company-wide programmes were diverting a substantial amount of their effort from matters which may affect plant safety. Typically, people interviewed estimated that 50% of their time was being spent on such tasks."

"...we were informed by the managers we spoke to that site- and company-wide programmes which are business driven (for example, one element of the Beyond 2000 change programme is driving towards a 25% cut in costs) were diverting as much as 50% of their time from operational matters which may adversely affect plant safety. This led them to be unable to dedicate sufficient time to being on plant."

"...substantial effort is being diverted to non safety-related tasks at all management levels."

"[The Corporate Director of Environment, Health and Safety's] removal from the Executive Team could be seen to imply a diminution of the importance with which his role is viewed within the Company."

"Management structures and processes have been put in place to drive forward our quest for world-class safety and plant operation..."

"There was evidence of managers condoning poor practice such as operation of a plant with multiple alarms showing in the control room."

"We found little evidence of an effective system in use across the site for proactively confirming that safety is being managed on plants...we consider this to be a significant deficiency within the safety management system."

"...most managers we interviewed had an excessive workload which affected their ability to monitor safety adequately."

"...there is a lack of a high quality management system across the site which is compounded by an overly complex management structure."

"BNFL staff interviewed told us they knew of no guidance on what is expected of managers in terms of control and supervision of operations."

"Employees must follow correct safety procedures in all aspects of their work."

"We observed operators in some of the older plants running them with a number of systems in an alarm state."

"We noted operators using uncontrolled copies of operating instructions at work locations and in one case a temporary instruction, posted up for use despite it having been formally withdrawn."

"During the inspection we found that amongst plant operators and supervisors, the knowledge and visibility of operating rules and safety mechanisms was variable and at times poor. The ability of operators and supervisors to demonstrate positive compliance with operating rules was generally poor."

"Discussions with staff at lower levels in many areas of the site revealed an absence of clear and comprehensive accountability statements for both safety and operational matters."

<p>"Auditing safety: Our audit arrangements are a key element of the management system and follow internationally accepted standards of good practice."</p>	<p>"[There is] a lack of an effective independent inspection, auditing and review system within BNFL. Without a vigorous independent inspection, auditing and review system, HSE does not see how BNFL can make acceptable and timely progress in delivering a high quality safety management system across the site."</p> <p>"We found little evidence of routine monitoring or auditing by supervisors and managers to ensure that operating instructions and safety related documentation were being complied with."</p> <p>"[Safety, Health & Environment] do not have the capacity to directly perform an auditing and review system."</p> <p>"We...question whether sufficient effort is being provided by BNFL to the task of auditing."</p>
<p>"Task group: Occupational Safety. Aim: Gain recognition as world leader."</p>	<p>"We found there were significant variations across the site in the application of...safe systems of work."</p>

"Task group: Operational integrity.
Aim: To ensure our plants always operate within required safety margins."

"...some plant managers we spoke to did not know the basis of the staffing levels that were specified for their plant...[this is] a failure to adequately demonstrate that safe operation/shutdown can be maintained."

"We noted a lack of systems for controlling the configuration of plant and equipment in its intended operational state...In several plants we also observed that the state of labelling of plant and equipment was poor, particularly in the older plants, which we consider is not conducive to safe operations."

"Coupled with the database, a new review process has been implemented to learn the lessons from events occurring in other parts of the company."

"We found signs of frustration in users due to the system's limitations in some areas. We found a shortfall of information on the system...only a small fraction of the information is subsequently considered. We were concerned that some managers were not aware of incidents elsewhere on the site which had important learning points for them. It was apparent the system was overlooking what we considered to be substantial learning points and that the learning from experience process is not fully meeting its design intent."

"...BNFL's investigations are not sufficiently thorough...We...noted the low quantity and questionable quality of evidential information contained in BNFL's folders of evidence."

"We found that some of the investigations did not correctly identify some of the immediate and root causes of the incident."

"We were disappointed to find failures to learn from experience in most of our sample."

"[BNFL safety initiatives] encourage clear ownership of safety improvements and ensure everyone is working towards a common goal of zero accidents."

"We found examples of events where intended operational control had been lost although safety had not been substantially affected: these events had not been considered by the plants to be reportable...The absence of reporting can...be seen as an indication of poor safety culture and lack of a questioning attitude."

"...we observed that behind any deficiency in an individual's performance was often a trail of poor standards which had been tolerated by management...it appeared that higher levels of management were unaware of day to day custom and practice. When the custom and practice was brought to their attention by an incident, they considered the custom and practice to be unacceptable. We note that concern amongst employees and others such as the contractors at BNFL Sellafield, and the sense of injustice which is engendered, has grown within the past year."