



The Dangers of Irradiation Facilities: Case Study – New Jersey

Owners of food irradiation plants say their facilities are safe. They say accidents rarely happen. They say they comply with health and safety regulations. They say there are no public safety hazards.

The industry's safety record, however, tells a completely different story – one that should make government officials think twice about entrusting these companies with handling our food supply. Facilities have caught fire. Equipment has malfunctioned. Radioactive water has been flushed down toilets into the public sewer system. Radioactive waste has been thrown into the garbage. Company officials have been convicted of lying to federal investigators to cover up their mishaps.

One has to look no further than New Jersey, where the safety records of irradiation plants illustrate just how far these companies can stray from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's standards of "meticulous attention to detail" and "full compliance" to safety rules. Their approaches to safety include the casual, the incompetent and, sometimes, the criminal. When dealing with radioactive materials, all can have lethal consequences for the public.

Whippany

Between 1986 and 1998, this plant, owned by New Jersey-based Isomedix, failed five NRC safety inspections. The violations included an unaccounted for 55-gallon drum of radioactive waste, and a mechanic going on vacation for more than a week before fixing a malfunctioning safety device.

In 1994, NRC inspectors discovered a "gray cask" containing a leaking source of radioactive cobalt-60. NRC regulations require leaking sources to be removed from service, decontaminated, repaired or disposed of. This source of cobalt-60 had begun leaking in 1976.

In 1998, more than 20 years later, Isomedix had still failed to come up with a proper disposal

plan. Isomedix asked for a "one-time exemption" from NRC regulations, rather than pay the costs of building a transport container. Finally, in 1999, the company said it would get the necessary container built.

By this time, Isomedix had been purchased by STERIS, an Ohio-based company that continues to operate the facility.

Salem

Between 1984 and 1999, this facility, owned by Illinois-based SteriGenics, failed NRC safety inspections four times. When safety equipment failed on another occasion, the NRC raised concerns that SteriGenics would resume operations "without a full understanding of the causes

involved and the necessary corrective action to be implemented.”

The plant continues to be operated by IBA, a large Belgian company that bought out SteriGenics in July 1999.

Parsippany

In June 1974, the radiation director at this Isomedix cobalt-60 facility, was exposed to a near-fatal dose of 400 rems while irradiating medical supplies. The worker was critically injured and hospitalized for a month.

Two years later, a fire near the cobalt storage pool released chemicals into the pool that caused the cobalt rods to corrode and leak. Radioactive water was then flushed down the toilet into the public sewer system.

Eventually, concrete around the cobalt-60 pool, as well as the toilet and bathroom plumbing, was found to be radioactive and was taken to a nuclear waste dump. The amount of radiation released into the public sewer system was never determined. Recent reports indicate that this plant is no longer in operation.

Dover

In June 1986, two senior executives of Palo Alto, Cal.-based International Neutronics were indicted on federal charges of conspiracy, mail fraud and wire fraud in connection with an October 1982 spill of 600 gallons of water contaminated by radioactive cobalt-60.

After a pump malfunctioned, workers were instructed to pour the radioactive water down a shower drain that emptied into the public sewer system. Workers were also ordered to wear their radiation-detection “badges” in such a way to falsify radiation levels.

In the words of a federal prosecutor, company executives “bamboozled” NRC inspectors by delaying an inspection of the facility, where food, gems, chemicals and medical supplies were irradiated.

A \$2 million cleanup included the cost to dispose of radioactive material at a nuclear waste dump in South Carolina.

International Neutronics vice president Eugene O’Sullivan, a former member of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, was convicted of conspiracy and fraud in October 1986. Recent reports indicate that this plant is no longer in operation.

Rockaway

The two-decade legacy of mishaps at this facility, originally owned by New Jersey-based Radiation Technology, began in 1977, when a worker was exposed to a near-fatal dose of 150-300 rems when a system designed to protect workers from radioactive cobalt-60 failed. In 1986, the NRC cited company executives for intentionally disabling the system.

In 1988 – after more than 30 NRC violations, including one for throwing out radioactive garbage with the trash – company president Martin Welt and nuclear engineer William Jouris were charged in federal court with 11 counts of conspiracy to defraud the NRC, making false statements and violating the Atomic Energy Act.

Welt, who threatened to fire workers who did not lie to NRC investigators, was also charged with obstruction of justice. Both men were convicted. Jouris was sentenced to probation; Welt was sentenced to two years in prison, placed on three years probation and fined \$50,000.

In 1986, a 10-year clean up operation began following the discovery that Radiation Technology had disposed of some radioactive waste by burying it on-site. Proper documentation of where the radioactive waste was buried had not been kept. Investigations found four sites – three within the company’s fenced property and one outside, along a creek that drains into Lake Denmark.

SteriGenics took over the plant in 1996. That October, during a routine safety inspection, the NRC discovered an old irradiator containing 19 curies of radioactive cobalt-60 being stored without any plans for its proper disposal. SteriGenics complained that these older irradiators were “problematic” to dispose of because no containers exist that are large enough to transport them to an appropriate waste site. They asked for a “one-time exemption” from NRC regulations so they could ship the unit. Two years later, SteriGenics had still not come up with a proper disposal plan. The plant continues to be operated by IBA, a Belgian company that bought out SteriGenics in July 1999.



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