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Environment Department Issues Compliance Order with \$121,170 Penalty to PNM's San Juan Generating Station near Farmington for Violating State Radiation Protection Regulations

(Santa Fe, NM) The state Environment Department issued a compliance order with a penalty of \$121,170 to Public Service Co. of New Mexico's San Juan Generating Station for violating state regulations by allowing a radioactive gauge from the company to be mishandled and delivered inadvertently to a scrap metal recycling facility. The PNM coal-fired power plant is in Waterflow, N.M. near Farmington.

The department's Radiation Control Bureau's investigation determined the company removed the gauge in fall 2007 when the company began replacing about 300 radioactive gauges with new technology. Those gauges were used for a variety of process controls such as measuring levels of coal used by the facility.

The investigation showed an employee discarded the radioactive gauge, which was used to measure the flow of wastewater in pipes, along with scrap metal. That metal and the gauge were then driven to Valley Scrap Metal Inc. in Kirtland.

"Radioactive devices must be handled carefully by those licensed to oversee such equipment," said Environmental Health Division Director Carlos Romero. "The company failed to maintain control of this device and it wound up at a facility where someone could have purchased the equipment without the knowledge that it was radioactive."

Prolonged exposure to radioactivity from the equipment could burn or cause tissue damage in people. Ingesting radioactive materials can also be lethal and cause organ damage. The device could have been melted down with other scrap metal, which the steel industry uses to construct a variety of items, including household products like bed frames. Consumers would then have been exposed to radiation.

The bureau learned of the incident after an employee of the scrap metal company reported that a load of scrap metal it delivered to a Colorado metal recycler set off a radiation monitor on April 7. The load was returned to the scrap metal company, where managers stored the equipment in a safe location where no one would be exposed to it.

PNM violated the NM Radiation Protection Regulations and its state radioactive material license by failing to secure radioactive material from unauthorized removal and access. Mismanagement and loss of control of the equipment may have resulted from the layoff of key employees in the company's health and safety program.

The department issued the order yesterday. The company has 30 days, until July 24, to correct violations listed in the order. The company can also arrange to meet with the department to discuss the violations and the penalty in the order.

For more information, call Marissa Stone at (505) 827-0314.

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