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## TVA whistle-blowers contacted by feds

### NRC may loosen regulations on publicizing safety violations

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The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, looking into security issues at TVA nuclear plants, has called on two former plant guards who talked to *The Tennessean* about lax safety standards that they said went ignored.

The agency won't discuss the TVA situation and may never do so. The NRC's position is that security violations not be made public, said Roger Hannah, an agency spokesman in Atlanta.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, the federal government has clamped down on access to a lot of information related to nuclear plants and other facilities that officials deemed terrorists could use.

In NRC security investigations, even fines levied — if there are any — are kept secret, Hannah said.

That wasn't the case this spring, however, when a \$130,000 fine against a Florida Power & Light Co. was announced. Its Wackenhut Nuclear Services guards slept on duty on several occasions from 2004 through 2006 at the Turkey Point Nuclear Plant.

The fine was an exception, Hannah said: "The commission decided to release that to show action had been taken."

Ann Harris, a former Tennessee Valley Authority employee and a whistleblower who worked in the agency's nuclear plants in the 1980s and 1990s, said a window into what's going on is needed for safety's sake.

"Until TVA and the NRC are publicly embarrassed, they're not willing to look at safety issues," she said. "That's the way it's always been with them."

She took complaints to the media more than a decade ago when she worked for TVA and brought attention to a number of matters, including an agreement that NRC and TVA had at the time in which the first would report whistle-blowers to the latter.

She said that was one reason for swift and severe harassment she and others suffered at work after making complaints. She received settlements that include \$75,000, tuition for college and legal fees.

The NRC is considering loosening its policy and allowing a bit of openness about nuclear plant security oversight to bolster public confidence that the facilities are properly guarded.

Public hearings on the topic ended Sept. 4, and a staff recommendation is expected next month.

Representatives of both federal agencies defend their approach to complaints, saying that protection of public health and well-being is a top priority.

"We look into anything anybody says, always," said TVA spokesman Jim Allen.

Said the NRC's Hannah: "We want to make absolutely certain that people feel free to bring security and safety issues to us without fear of them being retaliated against."

## NRC agents make calls

Harris said she received a phone message from an NRC agent after a Sept. 3 *Tennessean* article featuring three women she is helping, who say they were harassed, intimidated and lost their nuclear security jobs at TVA plants after reporting safety shortcomings.

Two of the women say they, too, were contacted after the article's publication.

"I got a call from NRC's Inspector General's Office in Washington, D.C., wanting to know about threats I received in mediation," said Janet Conner, 48, who worked as a Pinkerton Government Services security guard at TVA's Sequoyah Nuclear Power Plant near Chattanooga.

She said that her reporting of safety lapses had resulted in bullying by bosses and colleagues and eventual banishment from the job site. When a session was arranged in which she expected a mediator to help her, she said, she was blindsided and pressured to take a settlement offer.

She had told the NRC about problems before that session, but to no avail, she said.

She hasn't yet returned the recent call.

"I've just lost all confidence in all of them," she said. "I don't trust any of them anymore. They knew all this, all this time."

## Letter wrong, she says

Linda Nadeau, 63, had a similar response.

"They said they were calling after seeing the newspaper article," said Nadeau, a former Pinkerton security guard at TVA's Watts Bar Nuclear Plant about 110 miles east of Nashville.

Two NRC representatives talked to her for about 30 minutes and gave her some hope that things she saw occurring, like guards sleeping and the intimidation of whistle-blowers, would be stopped, she said.

The conversation included questioning about guard inattentiveness and the contact she made earlier with the NRC, she said.

But a few days after the call, she said, a letter arrived as a result of her reporting issues to the NRC earlier this year. It outlined her complaints, but was incorrect, saying untrue things, including that she admitted to being insubordinate, she said.

At the time of that earlier interview, the investigator hadn't seemed too interested in her concerns, she said.

One of the two NRC agents who had telephoned this month told her she was "such a good citizen" for bringing up concerns, she said, but now she was wondering if the letter he said he would send would be as off-base as the other.

"I'm teed off," she said. "Look at the mess I'm in because of this. I'm out of a job and no one will hire me."

## Security change made

TVA officials announced plans this month to end the agency's contract with a private company for security guards and to set up an in-house force, as the electricity producer used to have.

No criticism was made of Pinkerton. The change was labeled an "organizational alignment" for TVA's three nuclear plants.

Security changes have taken place at nuclear plants elsewhere, too.

Exelon, which owns 10 nuclear plants, ended its contract with Wackenhut Nuclear Services last year after its security guards were videotaped sleeping at the Peach Bottom plant in Pennsylvania.

## Video got attention

An employee who had — without effect — reported the frequent on-duty slumber to supervisors and who alerted the NRC finally videotaped the activity on his cell phone and gave it to a television station.

That got attention.

"It's really quite painful for everybody for these people to be forced into this kind of venue to get their issues addressed," Ann Harris said.

The activist group, Project on Government Oversight, stepped up in the Peach Bottom case and provided a letter to the NRC's Office of the Inspector General, indicating that the commission staff had been told months before the videotape came out about both sleeping guards and officers' fears of retaliation for raising safety concerns.

The office, which is independent of the NRC, launched an inquiry.

A report completed four weeks ago says the NRC erred in several ways, including referring issues for investigation to management that involved complaints against the management, not probing deeply enough and not questioning whether the stated procedures to keep guards alert were followed.

A response from the agency has been requested within 120 days.

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