

News from the Savannah River Site

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For Immediate Release

SRS Radiological Assistance Program: Nuclear “First Responders” for the Department of Energy

AIKEN, S.C. (March 10, 2016) – Super Bowls, national political conventions, and the Pope’s recent visit to the U.S. are all events requiring experts, working as a team, to secure a public area in an effort to prevent the potential use of nuclear materials intended to cause harm and destruction. An organization often responding to such events is the Department of Energy’s (DOE) Radiological Assistance Program (RAP). This regional emergency response asset is based at nine DOE sites across the country, including the Savannah River Site in Aiken, S.C.

Consisting of specially trained Federal and contractor personnel, RAP Teams have specialized equipment to assist with a wide range of radiological and nuclear events.

The RAP Team based at SRS is responsible for DOE Region 3, which includes the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Florida. They have also assisted DOE RAP Teams from other DOE regions and on occasion, in other countries. DOE Region 3 RAP personnel played an important role in the overall DOE response assisting the Japanese government after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, initiated by a tsunami wave, in 2011.

The DOE Region 3 RAP program managers Christina Edwards, National Nuclear Security Administration, and Roy Windham, Savannah River Nuclear Solutions (SRNS), are two of five full-time employees within this program. The majority of each RAP Team is made up of highly dedicated individuals who volunteer to support the RAP mission as a collateral duty.

“I just can’t say enough about how hard our RAP Team volunteers work, no matter the task,” said Edwards. “The service they provide our country deserves a high level of recognition.”

According to Windham, the services provided by the RAP Team can be tailored to meet the needs of the requesting organization. The services can range from something as simple as a providing guidance via a telephone conversation to sending multiple teams to the incident scene to assist in response efforts.

The Radiological Assistance Program was originally sponsored by the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) in the late 1950s due to the potential hazard to public health and safety associated with the rapidly expanding use of radioactive materials in industry, medicine and agriculture. RAP leveraged the expertise available in the AEC staff and made those resources available to assist state and local officials in dealing with any emergency situation that might arise from the use or transportation of radioactive materials.

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Today's RAP mission has expanded to include crisis response as well as the traditional consequence management operations.

Crisis response duties involve search, detection and identification activities for lost, stolen or other malevolent uses of radioactive materials in cooperation with law enforcement partners. It also includes the preventive measures used to protect the public attending special events. The venues for these preventive measures are typically convention halls, stadiums, large buildings and, at times, shipping ports and other special event locations.

Consequence management traditionally entails radiation monitoring and identification of radioactive contamination during a nuclear emergency while assisting federal, state and local agencies.

"This could involve transportation-related accidents, nuclear power plant events or something as small as radioactive materials that have leaked from equipment or a container," said Windham. "For example, our team that worked at the Fukushima site spent hours conducting aerial monitoring, carefully mapping the levels of contamination found across the area surrounding the damaged nuclear power plants."

The equipment used is very sensitive. "Not only can our equipment detect the presence of radioactive material, but in many cases we are able to determine the radionuclide that is emitting the radiation," added Windham. "This helps in determining the source of the radiation such as an industrial device or something of particular concern such as special nuclear material."

According to Windham, the data obtained and the models created are the foundation upon which protective action recommendations are made for the general public and emergency responders.

The SRS RAP Team is required to activate and have a response team and their equipment on the way to the incident site within two hours and to arrive at that location, anywhere within their five-state region, within six hours.

The team has dedicated U.S. Government vehicles for ground transportation and air-charter contracts in place for several types of aircraft that can fly out of Aiken or Augusta.

Savannah River Nuclear Solutions is a Fluor-led company whose members are Fluor Federal Services, Newport News Nuclear and Honeywell, responsible for the management and operations of the Department of Energy's Savannah River Site, including the Savannah River National Laboratory, located near Aiken, South Carolina.

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Caption: Radiological Assistance Program 3 team member and SRNS employee Mike Conaway completes software connections for mobile detection equipment. RAP 3 personnel conduct real-time monitoring of gamma and neutron radiation detection equipment as it is deployed in the field, often at major public events.

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