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Below please find the Technical Brief on The Impact of Mixed Oxide Fuel Use on Accident Consequences at Fukushima Daiichi. This Technical Brief contains factual information prepared by the ANS Special Committee on Nuclear Non-Proliferation.

The Impact of Mixed Oxide Fuel Use on Accident Consequences at Fukushima Daiichi

American Nuclear Society Technical Brief – March 2011

Conclusion

Mixed Oxide (MOX) fuel has been used safely in nuclear power reactors for decades. The presence of a limited number of MOX fuel assemblies at Fukushima Daiichi Unit 3 has not had a significant impact on the ability to cool the reactor or on any radioactive releases from the site due to damage from the earthquake and tsunami.

Summary

At the time of the magnitude 9.0 earthquake, Fukushima Daiichi Unit 3 was operating with 32 mixed oxide (MOX) fuel assemblies and 516 low enriched uranium (LEU) fuel assemblies in its reactor core. In other words, less than 6% of the fuel in the Unit 3 core was MOX fuel. There were no other MOX fuel assemblies (new, in operation or used) at the Fukushima Daiichi plant at the time of the accident.

MOX fuel assemblies were loaded into Fukushima Daiichi Unit 3 for the first time in the fall of 2010. The MOX fuel had been used for less than five months at the time of the accident. Differences in initial fuel composition between MOX and LEU fuel can lead to differences in consequences (prompt fatalities and latent cancers) following a core damage event with releases to the environment.

There are indications that Fukushima Daiichi Unit 3 suffered damage to some of its core. The core damage resulted from a loss of core cooling due to damage to plant systems from the tsunami that followed the earthquake. The damage was not related to the presence of MOX fuel.

There have been no prompt fatalities as a result of radiation exposure from Fukushima Daiichi. Prompt evacuation has minimized radiation exposure to the public, so long-term public health consequences from radiation exposure are expected to be small. Given the small number of MOX fuel assemblies at Fukushima Daiichi Unit 3 at the time of the event, coupled with the short time of irradiation of the MOX fuel, it can be concluded that MOX fuel has had and will have no perceptible impact on any consequences from the event.

Background

It is important to note that while LEU fuel begins its useful life with no plutonium, as it is used in a light water reactor it builds up plutonium as a result of the nuclear reactions in the core. By the end of its useful life an LEU fuel assembly contains about 1% plutonium actually generates more power from plutonium than from uranium. All reactor cores contain plutonium; those cores loaded with some MOX fuel contain more.

Mixed oxide (MOX) fuel is comprised of a blend of uranium oxide and plutonium oxide. MOX fuel is predominantly uranium, with average concentrations of plutonium that range from 3-10%. The presence of plutonium produces modest changes in some physical characteristics of the fuel material such as thermal conductivity. However, MOX fuel and low-enriched uranium (LEU) fuel are fundamentally similar. Moreover, the physical dimensions and structural material of a MOX fuel assembly are essentially identical to that of a LEU fuel assembly. To the naked eye, a MOX fuel assembly and a LEU fuel assembly are identical.

Nuclear power plants have been generating electricity for use by the public since the 1950s, and over those years the industry has compiled an enviable safety record. Today over 400 reactors worldwide generate substantial amounts of emissions-free electricity. Dozens of those reactors currently generate power using a mixture of conventional LEU fuel assemblies and MOX fuel assemblies in their reactor cores. The majority of the fuel loaded into these reactors is LEU (60-70% or more), while the remainder (30-40% or less) is MOX. The use of MOX fuel allows the re-use of plutonium that was recovered during nuclear fuel recycling operations. The fabrication and use of MOX fuel has been carried out safely and efficiently on an industrial scale since the 1970s. Safety authorities in France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Japan have all approved the use of MOX fuel in light water reactors using the same rigorous standards that are applied for the licensing of LEU fuel.

Safety is the cornerstone of nuclear power plant operations. Nuclear power plant operators perform safety analyses to determine how the plants will respond during various “what if” problem scenarios. Some of those scenarios involve extreme conditions coupled with multiple equipment failures that lead to estimates of damage to the fuel in the reactor core. Scenarios with significant damage to the reactor core are referred to as severe accidents, and such accidents can result in the calculated release of radionuclides to the environment. Severe accident consequences are the adverse public health effects – fatalities and latent cancers – that arise from the offsite release of radionuclides from a damaged reactor core.

When uranium or plutonium atoms split (fission), they release a relatively large amount of energy which is converted into heat and eventually electricity. The smaller atoms left behind after fission are referred to as fission products. In addition, some of the uranium and plutonium atoms in nuclear fuel assemblies absorb neutrons without fissioning, becoming even heavier atoms called actinides. Both fission products and actinides are radioactive, posing a health hazard if they are released to the environment. Using MOX fuel alters somewhat the “source term,” or mix of radionuclides in the core and available for release following a severe accident. The different source term between MOX fuel and LEU fuel leads to different calculated consequences following a postulated severe accident.

In November 1999 the Department of Energy published the Surplus Plutonium Disposition Environmental Impact Statement which documented, among other things, the consequences of four severe accident scenarios at three different reactors using some MOX fuel derived from weapons grade plutonium. Each reactor accident sequence was analyzed with two different reactor core assumptions: a reference case with all LEU fuel, and a second case with a mixed core of approximately 40% MOX fuel and the remainder LEU fuel. For each case the severe accident was assumed to progress in the same manner. Relative to the reference case with all LEU fuel, the offsite consequences to the public with the mixed MOX-LEU core ranged from 4% lower to 22% higher, depending on the reactor studied and the accident sequence. Most cases resulted in consequence increases of 10% or less. The differences between the consequences relate back to differences in the source term. The mixed MOX-LEU core consequences were generally higher because of the presence of more radioactive actinides in the MOX fuel at the time of the postulated accident. However, the differences were modest compared to the uncertainty associated with the consequence calculations for these extremely low probability events.

The type of plutonium used in MOX fuel can also impact severe accident consequences. The aforementioned analysis assumed weapons grade plutonium. If the calculations had been done for MOX fuel containing plutonium from recycled commercial nuclear fuel, as is the practice in Europe and Asia today, the difference between the all uranium cases and the 40% MOX fuel consequences would have been greater than cited above. This is again due primarily to the presence of more radioactive actinides in used “reactor grade” MOX fuel (with plutonium from recycled reactor fuel) than in used weapons grade MOX fuel (with plutonium from retired nuclear weapons).

Turning to the Fukushima Daiichi reactors in Japan, Unit 3 was using some reactor grade MOX fuel at the time of the March 2011 earthquake. Had it been using a 40% MOX fuel core, one could expect an increase in severe accident consequences on the order of 10% for weapons grade MOX. With a 40% reactor grade MOX core, and applying a bounding factor of four increase relative to weapons grade MOX, the overall increase in severe accident consequences would have been on the order of 40% relative to the all LEU fuel case. However, Unit 3 was loaded with only 32 MOX fuel assemblies during refueling operations in the fall of 2010. There are a total of 548 fuel assemblies in the Unit 3 reactor core, so this represents less than 6% of the total fuel in the core. The MOX fuel had been operating in Unit 3 for less than five months; fuel assemblies are typically used for a total of 3-4 years in reactor cores before being replaced by new fuel and discharged to used fuel pools. Therefore, the MOX fuel would have built up relatively few radioactive fission products and actinides at the time of the earthquake and subsequent damage to the reactor core. With these facts in mind – the low percentage of MOX fuel in the core and the short operation time for the MOX fuel – it is evident that the presence of MOX fuel at Fukushima Daiichi Unit 3 has had no significant impact on the offsite releases of radioactivity following the earthquake and tsunami.

Other than the 32 MOX fuel assemblies in the Unit 3 reactor core, at the time of the earthquake there were no other MOX fuel assemblies (new or used) at the Fukushima Daiichi plant. The problems encountered at Fukushima Daiichi reactors stem from plant damage due to the tsunami that followed the earthquake, not the use of MOX fuel in Unit 3.

It is also important to put the public health consequences from the event in perspective. There have been no prompt fatalities as a result of radiation exposure. Moreover, prompt evacuation has minimized the exposure of the population to radiation. At this point, the consequences of the event are expected to be small. MOX fuel effects, if any, would be a small change to an already small number.

In conclusion, MOX fuel has been used safely in nuclear power reactors for decades. The presence of a limited number of MOX fuel assemblies at Fukushima Daiichi Unit 3 has not had a significant impact on the ability to cool the reactor or on any radioactive releases from the site due to damage from the earthquake and tsunami.