DEFENSE NUCLEAR FACILITIES SAFETY BOARD

September 15, 2026

Sandia National Laboratories (SNL) Cognizant Engineer Report for August 2026

Staff Activity: The staff did not conduct any onsite activities at SNL in August 2026.

DOE Directives: Earlier this month, DOE published a set of updated operating directives. This included significant changes to several directives of interest to the DNFSB, as well as rescinding four directives. The Sandia Field Office subsequently provided National Technology and Energy Solutions of Sandia (NTESS) with a letter of direction that modified the NTESS contract to incorporate the new directives and requested a plan within 30 days that detailing NTESS's approach and schedule for aligning with the new directives.

Emergency Management: Earlier this month, NTESS requested to cancel a planned criticality accident exercise at the Sandia Pulse Reactor Facility (SPR). The planned activity was meant to align with language in ANSI/ANS-8.23-2019, *Nuclear Criticality Accident Emergency Planning and Response*, to perform such exercises annually for facilities where there is a credible and non-trivial consequence from criticality accidents; however, per the site's criticality safety program, the risk of inadvertent criticality in SPR is considered trivial. The request to cancel the exercise referred to that conclusion, as well as noting that there is ongoing work to resolve an unreviewed safety question related to firefighting procedures as they pertain to criticality safety (see June 2026 report). Given that the only postulated criticality risk at SPR stems from water from firefighting activities, the NTESS request stated that it would be prudent to resolve that issue prior to conducting exercises. The Sandia Field Office approved the NTESS request and concluded that conducting the exercise would offer negligible safety benefit. The approval letter noted that the ANSI/ANS-8.23 requirement does not strictly apply at SPR (due to the determination that inadvertent criticality accidents are not credible at SNL) and that additional controls further lower the risk profile at the facility.

NTESS previously requested an exemption from a requirement to perform an annual full-scale emergency exercise for 2026 (a functional exercise was performed on July 7, as noted in the July 2026 report). This requirement came from DOE Order 151.1E, *Comprehensive Emergency Management System*. However, the new revision to this order, DOE Order 151.1F, which was published as part of the set of new directives and will be implemented in the near term (see above), does not contain this requirement. Consequently, NTESS has since retracted this request.