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HARRISBURG (March 29) -- The following is a statement by Clifford L. Jones, Secretary of the Department of Environmental Resources:

"Metropolitan Edison and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission have informed us there is an urgent need to begin discharging into the Susquehanna River waste water from the Three Mile Island nuclear power station that contains small concentrations of xenon, a short-lived radioactive gas.

"The Department of Environmental Resources has reviewed the problem and reluctantly agrees that the action must be taken.

"Officials from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the U.S. Department of Energy said the discharge can be made without harmful radioactive pollution of the river. Our own scientists agree.

"The problem is that 400,000 gallons of the waste water have accumulated in the sump of the plant's turbine building. The water, not normally radioactive, comes from the showers, the laundry, wash basins and leakage from turbine steam lines.

"There was no primary cooling water or water from the reactor's auxiliary building involved.

"The water apparently became contaminated because of the radioactive gases released into the plant as a result of the accident.

"NRC and U.S. Department of Energy officials advised the department that under normal operating conditions, the waste water is discharged routinely. However, discharges have been halted by the plant since the accident Wednesday morning.

"Plant officials warned us that unless the discharge resumed, the holding tanks would fill up and undiluted waste water would run directly into the river through storm drains.

"Plant and federal officials said they also needed the holding tanks to store other industrial wastes.

"The NRC advised DER it expects there will be no detectable levels of xenon in the river a few miles downstream of the discharge. The xenon will either dissipate into the air or be rapidly diluted by the river water.

"The NRC staff said the concentration in the discharge is only one percent of the proposed federal discharge standard for new nuclear power plants. There is no existing discharge standard for xenon for this plant.

"The plant initially began discharging the waste water at about 2:30 p.m. But the discharge was suspended at about 6 p.m. for further review by state and federal officials.

"DER wanted more assurances that xenon was the only radioactive element in the discharge. Tests at the NRC's mobile lab at the site confirmed that two types of xenon are present.

"The department is notifying downstream municipal water systems of the discharge, but that there is no cause for concern. The state of Maryland is also being notified."

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