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In federal probe of Three Mile Island, investigators have become a target

By Susan FitzGerald
and Jim Detjen
Inquirer Staff Writers

For nearly six years now, federal investigators probing the Three Mile Island accident have focused much of their attention on General Public Utilities Corp., the owner of the nuclear station.

But in recent days the attention has shifted from the corporation being investigated — to the investigators themselves.

In dramatic, written testimony submitted to a Nuclear Regulatory Commission licensing board last week, a former NRC investigator sharply attacked the integrity of an NRC investigation that had concluded that TMI managers did not cover up the severity of the March 1979 accident.

David Gamble, who was a member of the investigating team, said in the new testimony that the NRC's findings, released in 1981, "were not supported by the facts."

At the same time, federal sources say that a federal grand jury in Washington has begun hearing evidence on whether NRC employees might have thwarted investigation of the events surrounding the TMI accident.

Gamble refused to comment last week on whether the contents of his written testimony were related to the grand jury's inquiry.

In his testimony, prepared for an NRC Atomic Safety and Licensing Board hearing in Harrisburg, Gamble said:

- Portions of the NRC report on the possible withholding of information were written in draft form before any interviews were conducted and before investigators engaged in "any significant investigation of the facts."

- Norman Moseley, who helped coordinate the NRC investigation for the agency's Office of Inspection and Enforcement in 1980 and 1981, instructed the investigating team not to ask questions about whether TMI officials failed to report information to Pennsylvania authorities. Gamble also said that Moseley had given orders to investigators that interviews be limited to a pre-approved list of questions.

According to sources, a federal grand jury has begun hearing evidence on whether NRC employees might have thwarted investigation of the events surrounding the TMI accident.

- There was insufficient documentation to support an NRC finding that conflicts in testimony from plant personnel were "not the result of lying." Gamble said the NRC could just as reasonably have concluded that lying was the reason for the conflicts.

- The NRC staff discussed the need to portray favorably the conduct of the agency's on-site personnel during the accident so that the agency's commissioners would not ask questions about "possible fault of NRC employees."

NRC staff attorney Jack Goldberg said during the licensing board's hearing last week that Moseley, who is scheduled to appear as a witness, had said he was reconsidering whether to testify because of the federal grand jury's inquiry.

Moseley, who no longer works for the NRC, said in an interview last week that he had not been called to testify before the grand jury. Moseley declined to comment on Gamble's allegations.

Though the NRC has acknowledged that a grand jury is looking into "alleged wrongdoing of certain NRC employees relating to their actions within the regulatory process," spokesmen for the NRC and the Justice Department refused to comment last week on whether the grand jury was investigating matters related to those before the NRC hearing board.

Lisa Robinson, a spokeswoman for GPU Nuclear Corp., the GPU subsidiary that operates TMI, refused to comment on Gamble's allegations. Gamble, who now works as a criminal investigator for the Defense Department, is expected to testify in person before the NRC licensing board next week.

The licensing board's hearing is

ported to the NRC. Dieckamp told Udall there was "no evidence... that anyone withheld any information."

In recent testimony to the licensing board, Dieckamp said he did not know until March 30, 1979, that the reactor core had suffered significant damage. TMI Alert, a Harrisburg citizens' group that has been allowed to intervene in the hearings, is maintaining that Dieckamp and plant personnel knew as early as the first day of the accident that it was much more severe than what TMI management was publicly reporting.

As part of the Unit 1 restart proceedings, the NRC has also scheduled hearings on whether training for TMI reactor operators is adequate and whether plant workers falsified key safety records at both Units 1 and 2 in the months leading up to the accident.

The TMI accident — considered the worst in the history of the nation's commercial nuclear power industry — occurred when a series of mechanical problems and human errors caused the Unit 2 reactor to overheat dangerously. Radioactive gas leaked from the plant into the air and the surrounding region.

part of an NRC review of whether the management of GPU Nuclear has the necessary competence and integrity to safely operate TMI's undamaged Unit 1 reactor. GPU has been seeking the NRC's approval for more than five years to restart Unit 1, which was shut down for refueling at the time of the accident.

The NRC is not expected to vote on the restart issue until the spring, at the earliest.

Central to the board's inquiry is the question of whether Herman Dieckamp, president of GPU, lied to Congress and the NRC about his knowledge of the TMI accident. In a May 9, 1979, Mailgram to U.S. Rep. Morris Udall (D., Ariz.), Dieckamp denied a published report that said TMI personnel knew the reactor core was seriously damaged on March 28 — two days before that fact was re-