

in authority believed that the release from a high altitude abort was an improbable event and if it did occur would only add a very tiny increment to the plutonium that was in the atmosphere from weapons testing.³⁵ The “burn-up” aspects of safety considerations, however, caused the most problems in obtaining approval for the 9A launches.

The Division of Licensing and Regulation of the AEC expressed strong reservations about the safety of the forthcoming SNAP-9A launches and challenged assumptions regarding burn-up on re-entry. It reminded the Commissioners that the SNAP-9A devices contained ten times the amount of plutonium fuel that had been flown in the SNAP-3A. These concerns were never completely dispelled even though the launch went ahead with Commission approval. Approval was accompanied by the acknowledgement that safety review by the Division of Reactor Development and the Division of Licensing and Regulation was to continue and that throughout the Transit series the Commission would be advised of any “untoward events” that occurred.³⁶

The failure of the third Navy 5B satellite to achieve orbit caused some flurry and placed pressures on the safety team. A.R. Luedecke, AEC General Manager, reported to Chairman Seaborg:

Preliminary data on the April 21, 1963 SNAP-9A abort indicate that the payload reached a high altitude (over 1000 miles) over the South Pole and re-entered over the Mozambique Channel at a steep angle. . . .³⁷

A press release from Seaborg reassured the public:

From previous safety analysis and tests it had been concluded the re-entry will cause the plutonium-238 fuel to burn up into particles of about one millionth of an inch in diameter. These particles will be widely dispersed. . . and would not constitute a health hazard.³⁸

There were few negative repercussions. In June the AEC Commissioners were reassured by Duncan Clark, Director of the AEC Division of Public Information, that “the USSR is the only country to voice reaction to the news of the SNAP-9A failure to orbit.”³⁹ The issue stayed alive; inquiries from U.S. Senators seeking information and reassurances were received and answered at the AEC as late as October.⁴⁰ In the fall a review of the failure of the April launch was presented to the Space Council.⁴¹ As results from high altitude balloon samples