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CHAIRMAN

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The Honorable Karen L. Thurman
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congresswoman Thurman:

I am writing in response to your letter of December 9, 1999, on behalf of Mr. Keith A. Green of Dunnellon, Florida, regarding the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission's (NRC's) proposed rulemaking concerning the use of potassium iodide (KI) in emergency plans. Specifically, you raise issues relating to stockpiling KI in communities surrounding nuclear power plants. As you may know, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the NRC are the two Federal agencies that evaluate emergency preparedness at and around nuclear power plants.

Since 1980, when FEMA and the NRC developed the basic components of an emergency response program, KI was recognized for its potential contribution to public health and safety. KI, if administered before or within a few hours of exposure to inhaled (or ingested) radioiodines, and accompanied by other preventative measures (such as sheltering, evacuation, or embargoing of foodstuffs), can reduce the radiological dose to the thyroid. Doses to the whole body and internal organs from other radionuclides associated with reactor accidents, such as noble gases and cesium, are not reduced or affected by the use of KI. Current KI Federal policy, promulgated in 1985, provides for the use of KI by emergency workers and institutionalized persons who are expected to be exposed to radioiodines and allows the State and local decision-makers to decide on the availability of KI for the general public. The NRC is working with FEMA, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and other Federal agencies in reviewing this 1985 policy.

Separately, the NRC is in the process of considering a proposed amendment to its emergency planning regulations that would require that consideration be given to including KI as a protective measure for the general public as a supplement to evacuation and/or sheltering. The proposed amendment, however, would not require that KI be made available; that decision would be made by State and local governments. The Commission is currently considering the draft final rule and will take into consideration the public comments received in reaching its decision. In this connection, the NRC is also developing a guidance document to assist State and local decision-makers in their consideration of the role and use of KI for the general public in their site-specific emergency plans. This guidance document is scheduled to be available for public comment in mid-2000.

The NRC, together with FEMA, continues to support fully the emergency response activities of State and local governments associated with nuclear power plant sites. We will continue to work

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with our licensees and FEMA to ensure that the emergency response programs around plant sites continue to provide reasonable assurance that public health and safety are protected.

Sincerely,

Richard A. Meserve