

No. 93-38
Tel. 301-504-2240

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
(Wednesday, March 31, 1993)

NRC STAFF PROPOSES TO FINE NEBRASKA PUBLIC POWER DISTRICT
\$200,000 FOR ALLEGED VIOLATIONS AT COOPER NUCLEAR STATION

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has informed Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD) that it proposes to fine the organization \$200,000 for apparent violations of NRC requirements at the Cooper Nuclear Station, near Brownville, Nebraska.

NPPD has 30 days to pay the civil penalty or to protest it. If a protest is denied, NPPD may ask for a hearing.

NRC bases this enforcement action on findings of an inspection conducted February 1-9 of this year at the Cooper plant. The inspection reviewed the circumstances of NPPD's discovery of temporary strainers in the suction piping for reactor equipment cooling pumps. That inspection found two violations which, NRC has concluded, warrant imposition of a civil penalty: (1) a failure of NPPD to provide NRC complete and accurate information; and (2) a failure of NPPD's corrective action program on several occasions to identify and resolve a potentially significant safety concern.

The strainers involved are placed in system piping during construction to trap foreign matter which may be present after initial installation. They are to be used during start-up testing, after which they are supposed to be removed. If left in place during regular operation, they can restrict the flow of cooling water, thereby degrading a safety system and sometimes rendering it inoperable.

NRC in 1985 sent an advisory to all nuclear power plants informing them of the potential problems that could result if such temporary piping strainers were not removed. In August 1992, an NRC inspector found indications of a strainer in some suction piping of the Cooper plant's core spray system, which would be used during an emergency. The system drawings had no record of the strainer being there, but a check by NPPD found that a temporary strainer which should have been removed after start-up testing was still in place. In November, NRC issued a notice of violation (without a fine) for this non-conforming condition.

In its response to the citation sent to NRC on December 1, NPPD acknowledged that it had not thoroughly checked its systems after receiving the 1985 NRC advisory. NPPD further told the NRC that a physical inspection had found no visible signs of strainers in piping for five other systems, and that it had documentation indicating that strainers had been removed from the reactor core isolation cooling system. But on January 27 of this year, NPPD discovered that temporary strainers actually were present in pump suction piping for the reactor core isolation cooling system and in another system as well.

During its follow-up inspection in early February and during an enforcement conference with NPPD on March 4, NRC further learned (1) that temporary strainers were found in the plant residual heat removal system in 1986; (2) that NPPD, also in 1986, did not follow through on a recommendation from within its own organization that the reactor equipment cooling system be checked for the present of strainers; (3) that plant workers in September 1992 discovered indications that strainers could be present in the reactor equipment cooling system; and (4) that NPPD was aware that it had no documented evidence that strainers had been removed from the reactor core isolation cooling system. It was further pointed out at the enforcement conference that NPPD discovered in 1989 that temporary strainers apparently affected flow in a fan coil unit.

In his letter informing NPPD of the enforcement action, James L. Milhoan, NRC regional administrator in Arlington, Texas, said: "The facts that have emerged. . . indicate: 1) that NPPD's December 1, 1992, reply was inaccurate and incomplete in several material respects; and 2) that NPPD had multiple opportunities to act on information that indicated the possibility of temporary strainers left in plant safety systems and failed to do so."

Mr. Milhoan said that, while the strainers do not appear to have adversely affected the operability of these systems during normal operations, potential problems still existed. He also said NPPD's submission of inaccurate information to NRC did not appear to have been willful, but he emphasized that NRC "must be able to rely on information provided by licensees to make sound regulatory judgments."

During the enforcement conference earlier this month, NPPD described both short-term and long-term corrective measures it is taking. These include updates of plant drawings, improved personnel training, and a check of all systems to see if any other temporary strainers need to be removed. Mr. Milhoan urged that NPPD also focus more attention on the Cooper corrective action program, about which NRC expressed concern in its more recent systematic assessment report.

#