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NRC STAFF PROPOSES $50,000 FINE FOR ALLEGED VIOLATIONS
AT WOLF CREEK NUCLEAR GENERATING STATION

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has informed Wolf Creek Nuclear Operating Corporation (WCNOC) that it proposes to fine the company $50,000 for two apparent violations of NRC requirements at the Wolf Creek nuclear generating station near Burlington, Kansas.

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

NRC is taking this action as the result of information gathered in an inspection conducted May 10-13 at the plant and during an enforcement conference with WCNOC officials held June 9 at the NRC Region IV office in Arlington, Texas.

The inspection was prompted by a Wolf Creek worker's discovery on May 9 that, during preparations for start-up, the plant had moved from "hot shutdown" (Mode 4) to "hot standby" (Mode 3) with its electric motor-driven auxiliary feedwater pumps unable to respond to an automatic start signal. They were inoperable in that regard because the pump's hand switches in the control room had not been taken out of the "pull-to-lock" position as is required when the plant reaches this point during start-up preparations.

The electric motor-driven auxiliary feedwater pumps are used during start-ups and shutdowns to provide water to the plant's steam generators, which absorb heat from the reactor cooling system. During full power operation, they are backups to the regular feedwater pumps. The plant also has a steam-driven auxiliary feedwater pump, which was operable.

NRC's inspection confirmed the inoperability of the pumps in question and examined the circumstances. Based on the inspection findings and information gathered during the enforcement conference, NRC has concluded that a civil penalty is warranted by two violations that were found: (1) a failure to follow plant procedures which require that the pumps' hand switches be unlocked when the plant enters Mode 3, or "hot standby"; and (2) as a result, a failure to adhere to the plant's license

requirements for operability of these auxiliary feedwater pumps.

In his letter informing the company of the civil penalty, James L. Milhoan, NRC regional administrator, said it is clear to NRC that this incident was caused by inattention to detail by the plant operations staff.

"In its most basic form," Mr. Milhoan wrote, "this occurred because a supervising operator did not take the time necessary to read and understand what he was certifying, thus failing to recognize that a checklist designed to ensure, among other things, the proper positioning of the pump hand switches had not been completed. Pressure to enter Mode 3 prior to the end of the shift, whether real or perceived, may have contributed to the occurrence of this error."

Mr. Milhoan also reiterated a concern raised in the inspection report and at the enforcement conference -- that the error went undetected for 13 hours and during two shift turnovers. He acknowledged that circumstances mitigated the immediate safety significance of the incident: the steam-driven auxiliary feedwater pump was operable, and the plant was restarting after a refueling outage and thus had relatively low decay heat in the core.

But he said it is nevertheless important that safety-related procedures be followed as a plant heats up to power operation. "As WCNOC stated during the [enforcement] conference," he said, "the same mistake under other circumstances could have had more serious safety implications."

WCNOC promptly unlocked the pump switches when they were found locked. After informing the NRC, the company extensively investigated the incident and its causes. It also initiated other actions, including special training, notices to plant employees, improvements to procedures, and an independent assessment of plant operations.