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NRC STAFF PROPOSES TO FINE WOLF CREEK \$50,000

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has informed Wolf Creek Nuclear Operating Corporation (WCNOC) that it proposes to fine the company \$50,000 for a violation of NRC requirements at the Wolf Creek 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 because, from July 22 to August 27 of this year, there was a significant reduction in water flow through a heat exchanger which would have been needed had the plant experienced a loss-of-coolant accident during that time. This heat exchanger is used to assure the cooling -- and thus the reliability -- of plant safety-related equipment (such as emergency cooling pumps) during accident conditions. NRC inspectors confirmed the condition after WCNOC discovered it and informed the agency.

The reduced-flow condition was caused by a mechanic changing a valve position indicator while performing preventive maintenance on the valve on July 22. This action was beyond the scope of the job's written instructions and was not documented after it was done. As a result, the valve was left in the wrong position until corrected by WCNOC on August 27.

WCNOC personnel determined that water flow through the heat exchanger was approximately 840 gallons per minute less than the normally expected amount of 8,055 gallons per minute. The flow also was about 80 gallons per minute less than the minimum flow specified in the plant's safety analysis report.

Once WCNOC established that this non-conforming condition existed, it immediately repaired the valve involved and restored it to its required position. The company also assured that other similar valves were not mispositioned. It further developed plans to review pending preventive maintenance instructions in an effort to avoid such future problems. WCNOC's analyses show that, despite the reduced water flow, plant safety equipment would have functioned under all accident conditions.

In his letter informing WCNOG of the civil penalty, James L. Milhoan, NRC regional administrator in Arlington, Texas, acknowledged those analyses. But he emphasized that the NRC is concerned because a violation of work controls "resulted in a significant reduction of the margin of safety." Mr. Milhoan said the action "could easily have resulted in more significant degradation of [essential service water] flow because the mechanics involved did not recognize that they had affected flow by adjusting the valve position indicator incorrectly."

The NRC administrator further noted that Wolf Creek has had several recent violations similar in nature to this case, and that the December 1991 systematic assessment report on Wolf Creek also cited similar problems.

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