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NRC RAISES CONCERNS ABOUT PREVENTIVE
MAINTENANCE PRACTICES AT NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has sent letters to all licensees of nuclear power plants raising potential safety concerns about some utilities, as a cost-cutting measure, increasing the amount and frequency of maintenance while their plants are in operation to reduce the length of time a reactor is shut down for refueling or maintenance.

Earlier this month the NRC sent letters to the nuclear industry's Institute of Nuclear Power Operations (INPO) and the Nuclear Energy Institute (NEI) voicing similar safety concerns about preventive maintenance practices by licensees.

James M. Taylor, Executive Director for Operations, in a letter to the chief executive officers of utilities with NRC licenses, wrote that his staff recently observed planning and scheduling maintenance conducted during power operation that "did not thoroughly evaluate the impact of these maintenance plans on plant safety and, therefore, did not consider the risk implications of taking multiple components out of service simultaneously."

He said, "Some licensees adjusted their maintenance plans to reduce the length of the refueling outage by increasing the amount and frequency of maintenance performed during power operation." Every 12 to 18 months, a utility will shut down an operating reactor to replace one-fourth to one-third of the nuclear fuel rods with fresh fuel. The refueling process can typically take two to three months.

William T. Russell, Director of the Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation, wrote to NEI that the industry's "focus on reducing cost by reducing the length of refueling and maintenance outages" is increasing the frequency and amount of maintenance during operation.

While licensees may conduct maintenance on plant systems in accordance with technical specifications, doing maintenance on more than one system at a time needs to be evaluated thoroughly

to determine the impact of these maintenance activities on plant safety.

This is an important but interim problem, in that when the NRC's rule on maintenance is fully implemented in 1996, licensees will be required both to balance the improvement in reliability resulting from maintenance and to evaluate the safety impact of all equipment currently out of service before voluntarily taking out additional equipment.

The NRC staff has scheduled a meeting with NEI on October 28 at NRC headquarters to discuss preventive maintenance practices.

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