

United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Office of Public Affairs, Region I
475 Allendale Road King of Prussia, PA 19406
Fax: 610/337-5241
Internet: dps@nrc.gov or nas@nrc.gov

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Contact: Diane Screnci (610/337-5330) Neil A. Sheehan (610/337-5331)
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**NRC RATES HOPE CREEK AS "SUPERIOR" IN AREA OF PLANT SUPPORT,
"GOOD" IN THREE OTHER AREAS, IN LATEST PERIODIC EVALUATION**

The Hope Creek nuclear power plant has received ratings of "superior" in one category and "good" in three others, in the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's latest assessment of the facility's performance. The boiling water reactor is located in Hancocks Bridge, N.J., and operated by Public Service Electric & Gas (PSE&G) Company.

Covered by the Systematic Assessment of Licensee Performance, or SALP, report is the period from November 10, 1996, through May 16 of this year.

NRC staff and PSE&G officials will discuss the evaluation during a meeting scheduled for 2 p.m. on Wednesday, July 8, at the Processing Center at the plant site. The session will be open to the public for observation and NRC staff will remain afterwards to answer questions from members of the press and public.

Four functional areas of nuclear power plant performance are rated in NRC SALP reports: plant operations, maintenance, engineering and plant support. Ratings of Category 1 ("superior"), Category 2 ("good") and Category 3 ("acceptable") are assigned. The reports are issued roughly once every 18 months for each plant.

Hope Creek received a rating of "superior" in the area of plant support, up from a "good" rating in the last SALP report issued in December 1996. Plant operations, maintenance and engineering all retained "good" ratings since the last report.

Overall, the NRC found performance improvement in all of the plant's functional areas during this latest rating period. Indeed, operations since a fall 1997 refueling outage have been nearly event-free, the agency determined.

"Several human performance issues associated with operations and maintenance procedure violations, attention to detail and work controls were evident during the outage but were reduced significantly after plant restart," NRC Region I Administrator Hubert J. Miller wrote in a letter to the company relaying the SALP report results. "Though some equipment issues remain, the material condition of the facility improved as a result of the numerous modifications installed during the outage. The plant support functional area improved markedly, particularly with respect to security and emergency preparedness."

In the area of operations, the NRC found that operators performed very well during most major planned evolutions, or processes, and responded well to a number of problems during the period. But it was noted that control room operators at times did not exhibit conservative decision-making.

Regarding maintenance, improvements were observed in the material condition of the facility and in the on-line maintenance program, work performed while the plant was operating. Also on the plus side, the corrective maintenance backlog was reduced by more than half. Meanwhile, some issues that continued to challenge maintenance. For example, weak management oversight of both maintenance personnel and the work control process prior and during the restart following the refueling outage resulted in the extended unavailability of some safety systems.

Throughout the assessment period, engineering's management oversight and involvement in activities typically produced good results, the NRC found. Although the backlog of engineering activities grew, the items involved were properly reviewed for safety impact and suitably prioritized.

Lastly, performance in the area of plant support was deemed excellent. Among the favorably attributes were an effective radiation protection program and well maintained and implemented effluent control and environmental monitoring programs. Also, significant positive changes were made in the emergency preparedness and security programs.

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