

July 17, 2000

Dr. Dana A. Powers, Chairman
Advisory Committee on Reactor Safeguards
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Washington, DC 20555-0001

SUBJECT: ACRS/ACNW REPORT NUREG-1635, VOL. 3 ENTITLED "REVIEW AND EVALUATION OF THE NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION SAFETY RESEARCH PROGRAM - A REPORT TO THE U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION"

Dear Dr. Powers:

Thank you for your comments on the NRC's Safety Research Program. We appreciate your continued support for the program and your advice on how it might be improved. Your report has many specific comments and recommendations that will be the subject of continuing discussions between the Committee and the staff. We welcome this interaction and the Committee's willingness to discuss works in progress. This interaction has led to significant improvements in our products. We will discuss your specific comments with the Committee on an individual basis as we continue our interactions. I want to specifically address your comments on internal interaction and the evolving role of research.

We fully agree with your statement that ". . . NRC must ensure its knowledge base and tools for technical evaluation keep pace with the sophistication available in industry , which can change very rapidly . . ." In some instances, we may need a higher level of sophistication. In a time of declining resources and new regulatory challenges, it is essential that RES responds to the short-term needs of the program offices, and understands their environment sufficiently well to anticipate the agency's long-term needs. It is also essential that RES maintains responsibility to look toward the future, including the evaluation of the need for exploratory research. Similarly, the Commission, EDO and the program offices need to be fully aware of the major research programs underway.

As your report notes, ". . . the line organizations of NRC must have more stake in, appreciation for, and confidence in these research efforts". To accomplish this, and the equally important task of RES fully understanding the needs of the program offices, we rely heavily on a tiered approach. The Research Effectiveness Review Board (RERB) is working to facilitate internal coordination and understanding. As a second tier, RES Division Directors hold frequent meetings with their counterparts in the program offices, as do their respective staffs (tier 3). We are expanding our contacts with the Regions to ensure they participate in these counterpart activities to convey a regional perspective of research efforts. Each tier of interaction is important in understanding research efforts and user needs.

Further, we have elevated membership in RERB to a much higher level of management (Deputy Office Director, Deputy Regional Administrator, or Associate Office Director instead of Deputy Division Director). RERB reports directly to the Director, RES. This will focus high level attention on the basic parameters and overall priorities of the program. I expect the Director, RES, to brief me personally on these deliberations periodically.

RERB is considering the roles and responsibilities of the program offices and RES where interfaces occur, improvements in the user need process, and ways of measuring the effectiveness of RES in meeting user needs. Work is underway to ensure the Operating Plans of RES and the program offices clearly identify needs, responsibilities, expectations, and schedules. We believe this increased management attention will do much to address the concerns you expressed in your discussion of the internal context of research.

We also value highly stakeholder input, internal as well as external. Research products receive internal review by the program offices, and review by ACRS. We are seeking greater stakeholder involvement in the Water Reactor Safety Meeting. Those products associated with rulemaking or regulatory guides are issued for public comment before being finalized. On significant matters, it is not unusual to hold multiple workshops. Thus, we have had close contact with stakeholders.

We do see the advantage to a broader interaction with external stakeholders on the role and future direction of regulatory research. For this reason we are planning to meet with stakeholders from industry, consultant organizations, academia, international representatives, and the public in the near future. We believe the information gained from these discussions will help us formulate an improved research program in the future. The ACRS will be invited to present their views to the stakeholders.

Your report called for a commitment by senior agency officials to a well structured research program. In this regard, be assured that I personally agree and support the following excerpt from the Chairman's recent speech at the Nuclear Energy Assembly 2000 in Chicago on May 5, 2000:

My fundamental point is that virtually every major new initiative that the agency has undertaken over the past few years – license renewal, risk-informed regulation, design certification of advanced reactor designs, assessment of digital instrumentation and control systems, steam generator tube integrity programs, the new source term, and the list goes on and on – has required technical guidance derived from our research programs. I do not believe that the NRC would have either the reputation that it enjoys as a world leader in nuclear regulation, or the credibility and technical wherewithal to proceed with the implementation of a risk-informed regulatory structure, were it not for the contributions of the Office of Research. It is a program that deserves support. We would certainly be the victim of change rather than its master without the contributions from our research program.

Further, I periodically meet with the Director, Office of Nuclear Regulatory Research, to share our views on the broad program direction and address specific issues and concerns with research projects. Additionally, the Deputy Executive Director for Materials, Research, and State Programs (DEDMRS) maintains awareness of major research programs for me. The DEDMRS participates in Strategic Planning, budget planning, the Research Effectiveness Review Board, and the RES operating plan development and execution. The DEDMRS also receives periodic briefings on specific research activities and coordinates and promotes program office interaction with RES. Ultimately, responsibility for the evaluation of the programs of all offices and regions reporting to the EDO rests in the Office of the Executive Director for Operations.

This strong statement of support for the research program expressed by the Chairman is shared by the senior staff of the agency. In this light we welcome the Committee's suggestions on how to make the research program even more effective and efficient.

Sincerely,

/RA/

William D. Travers
Executive Director
for Operations

cc: Chairman Meserve
Commissioner Dicus
Commissioner Diaz
Commissioner McGaffigan
Commissioner Merrifield
SECY

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*See previous concurrence sheet.

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