

September 10, 2003

The Honorable John McCain  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator McCain:

This is in response to two letters addressed to you which the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has received from the Department of Energy. The letters were dated August 4 and 5, 2003, from Mr. Robert Tilford, and concerned the impact that "tripped power lines" would have on the safety of the Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station. His letters enclosed an article from the *Arizona Republic Newspaper*, dated August 3, 2003, which discussed a leaking seal on a reactor cooling pump that was discovered at Palo Verde Unit 3 following the July 28, 2003, grid disturbance and asserts that a "leak could have developed if power had been restored before workers noticed the ruptured seal." Mr. Tilford's August 5 letter notes that we can learn certain things from the outage and asserts that "[t]his situation may represent a 'systemic flaw' in the security or design of Nuclear Power plants nationwide."

The NRC requires protection of equipment, structures, and components necessary to ensure safe operation of nuclear power reactors. We agree that we can learn from the July 28, 2003, grid disturbance and subsequent trip of Palo Verde Unit 3. The necessary NRC inspections to ensure safe plant restart have already been conducted and corrective actions have been taken by the licensee to address specific issues prior to the restart of Unit 3. While the leaking seal on the reactor coolant pump was repaired before Palo Verde Unit 3 restarted, it should be noted that nuclear power plants have adequate monitoring systems in place to detect leaks of this nature and are designed to safely respond to this type of event during operations.

Nuclear power plant designs consider the potential for a loss of offsite power and have installed alternate AC power sources to ensure that the reactor core is cooled and appropriate containment integrity is maintained for a specified duration of loss of offsite power. The nine U.S. nuclear plants tripped by the power blackout in the northeastern United States on August 14, 2003, shut down safely and remained safe during the blackout. The NRC continues to evaluate the impact of grid disturbances and is currently gathering information to support our participation in the United States contingent of the Power System Outage Task Force, which was formed to assess lessons from the recent blackout.

I hope that this addresses the issues raised by Mr. Tilford.

Sincerely,

*/RA/*

William D. Travers  
Executive Director  
for Operations

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 Executive Director  
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