August 2, 2004

Ms. Sarah Webber
3001 Wendover Avenue
Lincoln, Nebraska 68502

Dear Ms. Webber:

I am responding on behalf of Chairman Diaz to your July 6, 2004, letter regarding nuclear power plant safety and the renewal of operating licenses. You expressed concerns about the potential health and safety risk to the public and the environment from aging nuclear power plants. You said that if the operating licenses are to be renewed, they should have to meet today's safety standards with strong aging management programs. You also said that the license renewal process must include full and meaningful public participation.

The highest priority at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is ensuring the health and safety of the public and the environment. The NRC relies on the regulatory process to provide reasonable assurance that current operating nuclear power plants continue to maintain an adequate level of safety. Over the life of the plants, this level of safety has been enhanced as a result of improvements in technology or based on operating experience, including experience with aging of nuclear power plants. The NRC updates its regulations and issues generic communications, which require implementation by nuclear power plant licensees, as appropriate, to maintain safety. The NRC also requires licensees to routinely test, monitor, and maintain systems, structures, and components relied on for safety to provide assurance that they will perform as intended. Daily oversight of licensee activities is provided by the NRC's onsite inspectors and is supplemented by periodic specialized NRC team inspections.

The NRC conducted a comprehensive Nuclear Plant Aging Research Program on safety-related systems, structures, and components during the 1980s and 1990s. The researchers identified the significant aging mechanisms and locations where these mechanisms could occur, and determined their detrimental effects. The research programs also evaluated applicable consensus standards and the effectiveness of inspections and maintenance to manage aging concerns. The NRC has continued to assess plant operating experience regarding aging since that research. Because aging is a continuous process, the NRC has found that many aging effects are dealt with adequately by existing programs during the initial license term. By crediting these existing programs and the regulatory process that continue to be applicable during the period of extended operation, the license renewal process focuses on plant structures and components for which current activities and requirements may need to be enhanced to manage the effects of aging in the period of extended operation (i.e., up to an additional 20 years).

When a licensee applies for license renewal, the NRC reviews both the safety and environmental issues associated with the application. Specifically, the licensee must provide the NRC with an evaluation of the technical aspects of plant aging. The licensee must also describe the aging management programs and activities that will be relied on to manage aging. In addition, to support plant operation for the additional 20 years, the licensee must prepare an

evaluation of the potential impact on the environment. The NRC reviews the application, documents its evaluations in a safety evaluation report and supplemental environmental impact statement, and performs verification inspections at the licensee's facilities. If a renewed license is approved, the licensee must continue to comply with all existing regulations and commitments associated with the original license as well as those additional activities required as a result of license renewal. Licensee activities continue to be subject to NRC oversight in the period of extended operation.

Public participation is an important part of the license renewal process. There are several opportunities for members of the public to question how aging will be managed during the period of extended operation. Information provided by the licensee is made available to the public in a variety of ways. The license renewal application and subsequent correspondence regarding the application are available to the public from the NRC's Public Document Room or through the NRC's Web site (http://www.nrc.gov) Agencywide Documents Access and Management System. Shortly after the NRC receives a renewal application, a public meeting is held near the nuclear power plant to give the public information about the license renewal process and provide opportunities for public involvement. Additional public meetings are held by the NRC during the review of the renewal application. NRC evaluations, findings, and recommendations are published when completed. All public meetings are posted on NRC's Web site. Key meetings are announced in press releases and in the *Federal Register*. Concerns may be litigated in an adjudicatory hearing if any party that would be adversely affected requests a hearing.

In conclusion, license renewal rests on the determination that a current operating plant continues to maintain an adequate level of safety. Over the plant's life, this level of safety has been enhanced through maintenance of the licensing basis, with appropriate adjustments to address new information from operating experience and technological advances. Additionally, the NRC's regulatory activities provide ongoing assurance that current operating plants continue to provide an acceptable level of safety and that this level of safety will be maintained for the period of extended operation if a renewed license is issued.

More information on license renewal is available on the NRC's Web site at http://www.nrc.gov/reactors/operating/licensing/renewal.html.

If you have any further questions regarding these issues, please call Stephen Hoffman of my staff at 301-415-3245 (sth@nrc.gov).

Sincerely,

/RA/

J. E. Dyer, Director
Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation

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Letter to S. Webber from J. E. Dyer dated August 2, 2004.

SUBJECT: RE-LICENSING PROCESS - SAFETY OF NUCLEAR REACTORS

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