

March 30, 2005

MEMORANDUM TO: Stephen D. Dingbaum
Assistant Inspector General for Audits

FROM: Martin J. Virgilio **/RA/**
Deputy Executive Director
for Materials, Research and State Programs
Office of the Executive Director for Operations

SUBJECT: AUDIT OF THE U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION'S
HIGH-LEVEL WASTE PROGRAM (OIG-05-A-10)

I am responding to the March 7, 2005, memorandum transmitting the subject audit report. I am pleased to note your conclusion that "NRC has taken steps to ensure that it is properly prepared to receive DOE's license application." With respect to your specific recommendation, I submit the following:

Recommendation

Develop and implement a single Agency-wide High-Level Waste (HLW) communication plan.

Response

Agree. The staff developed its first HLW Communications Plan in 2000, one of the first such plans prepared for a specific U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) program. After the President recommended, and the Congress approved, the Yucca Mountain site, the staff updated its plan in 2003 to address NRC's HLW communication activities during the rest of the prelicensing period. When drafting both the original plan and the subsequent update, the staff coordinated extensively with the Spent Fuel Project Office, the Office of the General Counsel, and the Office of Public Affairs.

CONTACT: Janet P. Kotra, NMSS/HLWRS
(301) 415-6674

Since the most recent update of the Communications Plan, the Commission appointed its first Director of Communications to provide integrated leadership and direction for communications across the Agency. The staff is preparing to update its HLW Communications Plan to provide for effective, deliberate, open, clear, and independent communications with NRC's stakeholders before and after NRC receives a license application for the proposed repository at Yucca Mountain. The staff is working with the Director of Communications and his staff to ensure that this new, updated plan reflects Agency-wide input and coordination. The updated plan will state clearly the roles and responsibilities of each office involved in communicating about NRC's HLW program. Also, the updated plan will address how staff will continue to fulfill its obligations, to ensure openness in NRC's HLW regulatory process, as the program transitions into a formal license review and hearing process. We expect to complete our update by the end of July. I believe that development of an Agency-wide plan, consistent with your recommendation, will serve as an essential guide as we prepare for the new communications challenges we will face when NRC considers the nation's first application for a geologic repository for disposal of HLW.

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