

May 3, 2006

The Honorable Jerry Weller
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Weller:

On behalf of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), I am responding to your letter of February 15, 2006, concerning the tritium contamination that has been identified at the Braidwood and Dresden facilities. The Commission understands your concerns regarding this issue and we have been actively addressing it. Although NRC assessments do not indicate a hazard to public health or safety, we understand the public concern about the release of radioactive material, even in amounts that do not pose a hazard, in a manner that is not intended. The NRC's objective is to determine the circumstances that led to the contamination and to ensure that the plant operators take appropriate corrective actions.

A number of developments associated with the Braidwood tritium contamination have occurred since your letter was received. Because the corrective actions being taken by plant operators and the NRC's oversight of these actions are evolving daily, the detailed summary and time line of events you requested in your letter will be forwarded to you under separate cover as soon as practicable. In this letter, I describe the NRC's strategic approach toward resolving this problem.

The NRC responded appropriately to the recent developments in accordance with the established inspection program, policies, and the relative safety significance. The NRC Region III office promptly initiated an inspection of tritium-related issues at all operating nuclear power plants in the State of Illinois, including the Zion facility, which has been permanently shut down. This inspection is in addition to the routine examination of effluent and environmental monitoring programs at all nuclear power reactors performed pursuant to the NRC's established Reactor Oversight Program (ROP). All commercial nuclear reactors in the United States release liquid effluents containing tritium. These controlled releases range from hundreds of curies to about 1,500 curies per year. All of these controlled releases are within the allowances of technical specifications established during licensing that ensure that potential doses remain within regulatory limits. Typically, the contribution of controlled releases of tritiated water to the dose that could be received by a member of the public is a small fraction of a millirem per year. For comparison, a millirem is the dose a person would receive from spending about 25 hours in the U.S. Capitol. The NRC staff has also commenced an augmented sampling and analysis program to provide a level of independent measurement of environmental ground water sampling and to verify the adequacy of the licensees' groundwater analysis. The NRC's primary focus has been, and will continue to be, to ensure that the extent and level of contamination are accurately determined and that appropriate corrective actions are taken to prevent future recurrence. The staff will evaluate the outcomes of the inspection activities and develop enforcement actions, as appropriate, consistent with the NRC's Enforcement Policy and the ROP. Copies of the NRC inspection reports documenting the licensee's and the NRC's actions, as well as any enforcement actions which may be taken, will be sent to your office and will also be public.

In addition, the NRC has established a task force to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the inadvertent, unmonitored releases of radioactive liquids containing tritium from all U.S. commercial nuclear power plants, including the regulatory requirements associated with the structures, systems, and components from which the releases emanated. The task force will identify and recommend areas for improvement that may be applicable to either or both the NRC and the industry. This task force is scheduled to complete its review in late summer 2006.

The NRC will remain vigilant to ensure that appropriate corrective actions are taken. Based on currently available information, the Commission does not believe that contamination issues at Braidwood and Dresden pose a hazard for public health and safety. If you have further questions or would like a briefing on this issue, please contact me.

Sincerely,

/RA/

Nils J. Diaz