August 15, 2008

Mr. Gary Sachs
PO Box 1864
Brattleboro, VT 05302

Dear Mr. Sachs:

I am the Technical Communications Assistant for NRC Region I. I am replying to an email you sent to the NRC's Office of Public Affairs on July 14, 2008, which centered on your concerns with the recent cooling tower problem at the Vermont Yankee Station. The NRC is concerned, just as you are, with the cooling tower problems at Vermont Yankee because a small portion of the two cooling towers serves a nuclear safety function (i.e., there are two towers, each tower has 11 cells - only 1 of the 22 cells is safety-related). However, inspection results to date have indicated that the structural problems experienced in August 2007 and in July 2008 were due to separate causes, and did not affect the nuclear safety-related cell.

The inspection activities performed after the partial collapse of one non-safety cell in August 2007 were documented in NRC inspection reports 50-271/2007-04 and 50-271/2007-05, copies of which are enclosed. Those inspections revealed that Entergy had performed inadequate internal inspections of the structural members of the cooling tower to detect the deterioration of the wooden support beams. I urge you to read these inspection reports to learn more about the function of the cooling towers, Entergy's corrective actions in response to the tower cell failure, and the NRC's review of this matter.

An NRC special inspection is currently on-going regarding the recent problem with the cooling tower distribution piping supports. The inspection report from the special inspection will be issued in October, and available for public review. As noted above, our preliminary review indicates that the cause of the July 2008 cooling tower problem is unrelated to the root causes of the cooling tower cell failure experienced in August 2007.

We understand that the structural problems experienced with the Vermont Yankee cooling towers have been a significant concern to the public and elected officials in Vermont. As the NRC has stated publicly, the NRC does not regulate the design, maintenance and operation of these cooling towers beyond the cell that performed a nuclear safety–related function (as well as the adjoining cell, which serves to protect the safety cell in the event of an earthquake). However, the NRC does closely regulate those portions of the plant that are critical to the safety of the nuclear reactor. The NRC does not believe that the condition of the non-safety-related portions of the cooling towers is reflective of the design, maintenance or material condition of those portions of the facility that we do regulate. Our findings regarding the performance of the Vermont Yankee facility for calendar year 2007 were documented in a letter to Entergy in March 2008, and at a public meeting this Spring. Our assessment of facility performance for the first six (6) months of 2008 will be detailed in a letter to Entergy in early September, copies of which will be available in the NRC document management systems (ADAMS).

You also referred to prior industry-wide reactor safety events since 1981. In each case, the NRC thoroughly evaluated each event, ensured the licensee took adequate corrective actions, and took enforcement action commensurate with the event where merited. In cases such as the Davis-Besse event where the performance of the NRC was called into question, the NRC evaluated its response and regulations in this matter and took actions, such as changes to our Reactor Oversight Process, to avoid a recurrence of such an event.

I hope my response to your email helped alleviate your concerns. Please contact me at (610) 337-5065 if you have any further questions in this matter.

Sincerely,

/RA/

Richard S. Barkley, PE
Technical Communications Assistant

Enclosure: NRC Inspection Reports 05000271/2007-004 and 05000271/2007005

In the remainder of your email, you made reference to prior industry-wide reactor safety events since 1981. In each case, the NRC thoroughly evaluated each event, ensured the licensee took adequate corrective actions in the matter, and took enforcement action commensurate with the event where merited. In cases such as the Davis-Besse event where the performance of the NRC was called into question, the NRC evaluated its response and regulations in this matter and took actions to prevent a recurrence of such an event.

I hope my response to your email helped alleviate your concerns. Please contact me at (610) 337-5065 if you have any further questions in this matter.

Sincerely,

/RA/

Richard S. Barkley, PE
Technical Communications Assistant

Enclosure: NRC Inspection Reports 05000271/2007-004 and 05000271/2007005

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