December 15, 2008

David Lochbaum, Director, Nuclear Safety Project
Union of Concerned Scientists
1707 H Street, NW Suite 600
Washington, DC 20006-3919

Dear Mr. Lochbaum:

I am responding to your letter of November 13, 2008, regarding the timing of the dispatch of the Special Inspection Team (SIT) at Beaver Valley. Specifically, you asked why there was a 50 day delay between when the initial plant condition that prompted the inspection was identified, and the dispatch of the team.

NRC Region I Public Affairs Officer Diane Screnci and Region I Branch Chief Ron Bellamy phoned you on November 14th to respond to your concern. During that discussion, they explained that the condition in question (i.e., an air void in a short section of recirculation piping) was promptly corrected. While the position of First Energy Nuclear Operating Company (FENOC) engineering was that the air void, created by an adverse slope in the recirculation piping, would become entrained in the water flow upon pump actuation and would not cause a safety problem (i.e., a loss of flow or pump damage), FENOC senior management brought in outside experts to more fully analyze the situation.

The timing of the SIT allowed FENOC's consultants time to complete their evaluation, then allowed our technical specialists to review the conclusions of the evaluation and determine the safety significance of the finding. As the root cause and corrective actions were known in this case, there was no need to conduct this inspection on the typical timeline for a SIT. During the phone call, Diane and Ron agreed with you that the press release discussing the SIT could have addressed the timing of the inspection, and committed to include such an explanation, when warranted, in future press releases. As a matter of fact, a press release on December 15th announcing a Millstone SIT contains such an explanation.

Such problems are not unique to Beaver Valley as our licensees implement Generic Letter 2008-01, "Managing Gas Accumulation in Emergency Core Cooling, Decay Heat Removal, and Containment Spray Systems." The question in each case is whether the voids found are promptly eliminated and whether they are safety significant, which is a complex function of the size of the voids, pipe size, flow rate, and pump features.

The SIT is continuing its review, and their report should be issued within 45 days after the inspection is completed. If you have any further questions, please contact Richard S. Barkley of my staff at (610) 337-5065.

Sincerely,

/RA/

Samuel J. Collins
Regional Administrator

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/RA/
Samuel J. Collins
Regional Administrator

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