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Sent: Thursday, October 08, 2009 6:29 PM
To: NRR_DLR_RER1 Distribution; NRR_DLR_RER2 Distribution; Pelton, David; Wrona, David; Lee, Samson; Kuntz, Robert; nrcoip6@earthlink.net; Banic, Merrilee
Subject: FW: NRC to Begin Special Inspection at Crystal River Nuclear Plant
Attachments: 09-055.ii.doc

From: opa administrators [mailto:opa@nrc.gov]
Sent: Thursday, October 08, 2009 4:48 PM
To: Dozier, Jerry
Subject: NRC to Begin Special Inspection at Crystal River Nuclear Plant

B-6



NRC NEWS

U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

Office of Public Affairs, Region II
61 Forsyth Street SW, Atlanta GA 30303
Web Site: www.nrc.gov

No. II-09-055

October 8, 2009

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NRC TO BEGIN SPECIAL INSPECTION AT CRYSTAL RIVER NUCLEAR PLANT

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission is sending a special inspection team to the Crystal River nuclear power plant, operated by Progress Energy on the west coast of Florida about 80 miles north of Tampa. The inspection team will inspect and assess circumstances associated with a crack discovered in the concrete of the containment building.

The plant had shut down for a planned refueling outage and to replace the steam generators inside containment. To move the large steam generators into the containment building, workers began removing concrete to create the necessary opening. During that work, a crack in the concrete was found in that area. The Crystal River containment is about 42 inches thick, contains both horizontal and vertical tensioned steel tendons, and is lined with steel plate. The crack was found about nine inches from the outer surface of the concrete.

After being notified, the NRC resident inspectors began to review the situation and several other specialized NRC inspectors who were at Crystal River to evaluate the outage activities also provided expertise. Plans for the agency's Special Inspection Team are still being made, but its members will be comprised of inspectors and experts from the Region II office in Atlanta and NRC headquarters in Rockville, Md. It is also likely the NRC will contract one or more independent experts to assist in the inspection.

"The discovery of this crack in the concrete does not appear to represent a major reduction in safety, and there are no immediate concerns because the plant is shut down," said NRC Region II Administrator Luis Reyes. "However, we want to make sure we have the right inspection resources to fully understand any safety implications before the plant restarts."

NRC Chairman Gregory Jaczko and Regional Administrator Reyes will make a previously planned trip to the Crystal River site for Friday, Oct. 9, and both the agency's Chairman and top official in the southeast will get a firsthand look at the containment.

The special inspection will review all the circumstances surrounding the crack in the containment building, determine potential generic issues for other nuclear plants with similar designs (although no similar separations in concrete have been discovered at those plants), and assess any effects on the plant's inspection program.

Progress Energy is performing an analysis of the concrete and overall containment to determine if there are safety implications and what may need to be done prior to the plant restarting. The NRC will review any analyses completed by the company as well as perform its own independent evaluations.

The NRC special inspection will continue for several weeks during the plant's outage and the plant will not restart until the agency is satisfied that the analyses and all work completed provide the required safety margin. When the inspection is completed, the inspectors will meet in a public setting near the plant to discuss their preliminary findings. The team will also issue a written report, available to the public, several weeks after the completion of the inspection.

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