

October 25, 2011

The Honorable Edward J. Markey
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Markey:

On behalf of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), I am responding to your letter of August 24, 2011, concerning the regulatory requirements for the maintenance of emergency diesel generators and batteries at operating nuclear power plants in light of the recent earthquake in Mineral, Virginia. You noted that when the North Anna Power Station lost electricity from the grid following the earthquake, one of the emergency diesel generators (EDG) failed to operate. As a point of clarity, all EDGs started following the loss of offsite electrical power as designed; however, while operating, one of the EDGs developed an engine coolant leak and was shut down by the licensee's operators. Within 10 minutes of the EDG's shutdown, a back-up diesel generator was placed in service. At no time was reactor core cooling compromised due to the loss of this EDG.

The NRC has in place both regulatory requirements and guidance for EDG and batteries for licensees to demonstrate that these systems can perform their intended safety functions during normal, emergency, and accident conditions. Specifically, the NRC requires licensees to perform routine surveillance testing and maintenance on electric equipments such as safety-related emergency diesel generators and battery systems. Regulations require licensees to maintain high reliability of EDGs to minimize the potential for losing onsite power capabilities. Finally, provisions addressing corrective action require that conditions adverse to quality (such as failures, malfunctions, deficiencies, deviations, defective material and equipment, and nonconformances) are promptly identified and corrected. The NRC also has issued two Regulatory Guides to assist licensees in addressing EDG and battery testing. We believe current testing requirements capture and correct a substantial majority of potential failures and provide reasonable assurance that at least one EDG will be available in the event of the loss of offsite power.

The NRC's ongoing oversight activities also provide opportunities to follow up on, and learn from, issues or problems that arise at individual facilities, such as the EDG failure at North Anna. The NRC's Reactor Oversight Process monitors the licensee's performance of safety-related equipment and includes follow-up on operating events. The NRC also periodically issues Generic Communications to all licensees to inform them of recurring or otherwise significant events identified from operating experience that may be applicable to their facilities, and alert them to the need to take action, as appropriate. Analysis of recent events at the North Anna nuclear power station, including the EDG failure, is still underway, and follow-up actions will be taken, as appropriate, once that review is completed.

As you know, the Near Term Task Force recently recommended strengthening station black out mitigation capability for existing and new reactors. This would include evaluating existing requirements for equipment, such as EDGs and batteries, relied upon to prevent or mitigate a station black out. As part of its approval of the near-term recommended actions that should be taken without delay, the Commission approved a high-priority rulemaking to be completed by April 2014 that would enhance the capability at nuclear power plants to maintain safety through a prolonged station black out.

The NRC is committed to the safe and secure operation of all U.S. nuclear power plants through efficient and effective regulation and oversight of NRC licensees. If you have any questions, please contact me or Ms. Rebecca Schmidt, Director of the Office of Congressional Affairs, at (301) 415-1776.

Sincerely,

/RA/

Gregory B. Jaczko