

November 21, 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 29, 2011, regarding the impact that Hurricane Irene had on some U.S. nuclear power plants and your concerns about the adequacy of existing emergency response requirements to address hurricanes and other extreme weather events.

The effects of Hurricane Irene were well within the design parameters of the nuclear power plants referenced in your letter. Following established protocol, the facilities took preemptive measures to maintain key safety and security features. A defense-in-depth approach incorporating diverse and redundant systems supported the ability of the facilities to maintain safety and security during the storm. The NRC has a well-established program to systematically collect, communicate, and evaluate domestic and international reactor operating experience, including nuclear power plant response to extreme weather events. We will continue to monitor nuclear power plant experience to identify possible enhancements to existing emergency response requirements.

As you noted in your letter, during Hurricane Irene a fraction of the emergency sirens at some nuclear power plants were rendered inoperable and others were placed on backup battery power. Emergency siren reliability is one of the issues addressed in an August 30, 2011 final rule amending emergency preparedness requirements. Included in this rulemaking is a new provision that will require the alerting and notification capability for each nuclear power reactor site to include administrative and physical means for a backup method. These additional means would be used in the event the primary method of alerting and notification were to become unavailable when needed.

Regarding your request that the Commission adopts the Near-Term Task Force recommendations related to seismic and flooding hazards and emergency response, the Commission has approved the staff's recommendation to implement the near term recommended actions that should be taken without delay, which included recommendations to perform seismic and flood walkdowns and hazard reevaluations. The staff has provided a prioritization of the task force recommendations, including a schedule with milestones and recommendations for appropriate stakeholder engagement. The Commission is currently considering the staff's prioritization recommendations.

Thank you for your interest in this matter. Please contact me or Rebecca Schmidt, Director of the Office of Congressional Affairs, at (301) 415-1776 if you have questions or would like to discuss this further.

Sincerely,

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Gregory B. Jaczko