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NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION TO EXAMINE ISSUE OF NUCLEAR PLANT FLOODING FROM POTENTIAL DAM FAILURE

~~In an issue that predates the current interest in natural disasters raised by the Japan earthquake/tsunami and reactor accident~~, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission began a review of plants to evaluate the potential generic safety implication of flooding due to dam failure. The identification of this issue predates the current interest in natural disasters raised by the Japan earthquake/tsunami and reactor accident, although it is discussed in the Task Force set up by NRC to evaluate lessons learned from the Japan events. The Agency began examining this issue in August 2010 and completed the initial, limited assessment earlier this year. Although NRC did not identify any immediate safety concerns, NRC staff has recommended the issue be further evaluated as a formal Generic Issue under the Generic Issues Program.

Dam failures can occur as a consequence of earthquakes, overflow, and other mechanisms such as ~~mechanical failures and~~ internal erosion and operational failures. A dam failure could potentially ~~cause flooding at a~~impact downstream facilities, such as nuclear power plant site, depending on a number of factors ~~such~~ including ~~as the~~ location of the dam, reservoir volume, dam ~~properties~~characteristics, and how the resulting flood is routed ~~site~~

~~characteristics~~. Although nuclear power plants are designed for protection against design basis flooding events (including flooding as a result of ~~postulated, credible~~ specific dam failures scenarios for some sites), new information has motivated the reconsideration of dam failure events (including events that are ~~currently considered~~ beyond those considered part of the design basis) under the Generic Issues Program. Examples of new sources of information include inspections that have found deficiencies in flood protection and related procedures, recent evaluations that suggest dam failure frequencies may be higher than previously calculated, and plant-specific evaluations that indicate flood heights resulting from natural phenomena and/or dam failures may be higher than previously expected [NOTE = what is this in reference to?]. This new information will be considered as the evaluation of the Generic Issue continues. The Agency's Office of Nuclear Regulatory Research manages the Generic Issues Program.

~~The Agency began examining this issue in August 2010 and completed the initial, limited assessment earlier this year. Although NRC did not identify any immediate safety concerns, NRC staff has recommended the issue be further evaluated as a formal Generic Issue under the Generic Issues Program.~~ Before being formally designated as a Generic Issue the NRC staff recommendation was reviewed by a panel of NRC technical experts who, unanimously concurred on proceeding with additional assessments to more fully characterize this issue. Further evaluation under the Generic Issues Program will systematically assess the risk and safety implications of upstream dam failure to determine whether regulatory action is necessary. If at any time an immediate safety concern emerges that has not already been addressed by the NRC, the Office of Nuclear Regulatory Research will notify the appropriate NRC ~~office~~ Office for action. A public meeting will be conducted later this summer.

The nuclear power plant sites considered for the screening of this Generic Issue are: Arkansas Nuclear One, Beaver Valley, Browns Ferry, Columbia, Cooper, Fort Calhoun, Robinson, Salem/Hope Creek, Indian Point, McGuire, Oconee, Peach Bottom, Prairie Island, Sequoyah, South Texas, Surry, Three Mile Island, Vermont Yankee, Waterford, and Watts Bar. Inclusion in the list above does not necessarily imply the site will be adversely affected by an upstream dam failure. Conversely, exclusion from the list does not imply other sites will not be considered if additional information arises during the development of this issue. The next stage of the evaluation ~~may include more or different sites~~will assess the need to expand or exclude this list, potentially including sites undergoing decommissioning that still have spent nuclear fuel onsite.