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April 3, 1979

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Hdqtrs. PDR

The Honorable Joseph M. Hendrie
Chairman
United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission
1717 H Street, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20555

Dear Chairman Hendrie:

The municipal power company of San Antonio, known as City Public Service, is a partner in the South Texas Nuclear Project, currently under construction.

The South Texas Nuclear Project is designed to produce 2,500 megawatts of electricity, of which San Antonio would receive 28 per cent, or 700 megawatts. The plant is scheduled to be brought into service beginning sometime in 1981. So far as I am able to determine, the South Texas Nuclear Project will be the largest nuclear generating plant in the United States.

Even though this plant cannot be brought into service until and unless operating licenses are approved by your Commission, I am naturally concerned that every possible step be taken to ensure the safety and reliability of the plant.

It seems reasonably clear from various accounts that reactors of the type installed at Three Mile Island may have a common design defect; your Commission has accordingly instructed owners of these plants to begin an immediate review of their safety.

The South Texas employs a Westinghouse plant, not a Babcock & Wilcox plant. However, there have been intimations in the past that Westinghouse plants have had possible problems with corrosion in their steam generator tubes. It is said that at the South Texas plant this problem will be corrected by chemical means. Nevertheless, the possibility of a common design problem in Babcock & Wilcox reactors coupled with the possibility of a common problem in Westinghouse units, raises serious questions about the ultimate serviceability of the South Texas Project.

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In view of the possibility, however remote, that there is a design problem common to nuclear power plants of a given manufacturer, does your Commission intend to order a safety review to include possible design problems at the South Texas Nuclear Project?

The construction of nuclear power plants involves, as you well know, very large amounts of money. The investment in the damaged unit at Three Mile Run exceeds $780 million; a similar unit at the South Texas Project would be valued at a billion or more dollars. With that kind of money involved, it is conceivable that constructors would want to avoid anything that would delay completion of a project or raise its costs. It would seem that inspectors would be at least as zealous to avoid the possibility of being too cautious in their assessments as they would be to ensure the integrity of the project. That is, inspectors would be at least as anxious to avoid raising the cost or delaying a project as they would be to do anything else. One inspector at the South Texas Project has alleged that he was fired for being too zealous; the managers say that the inspector was not trustworthy. Regardless of the outcome of this particular contest, does your Commission maintain continual surveillance during construction of these projects? Does it maintain independent inspectors of its own, and if it does, how many of these are assigned to the South Texas Nuclear Project?

Three Mile Island demonstrates that even a new plant is not absolutely safe. It also demonstrates that a huge investment can be rendered wholly unusable for an indefinite, perhaps even permanent period of time. If the plant is never capable of being repaired, insurance on it (if ever paid) would not cover even half the original investment, let alone make up for the hundreds of thousands of dollars a day that are needed to purchase power to replace the lost production. It is this fact that necessitates action by your Commission to assure that all plants are not only safe, but reliable. If there is any question whatever about the safety of any plant, it cannot be operated; and if it cannot be operated, the costs to ratepayers are simply astronomical.

Thus, if there is any question whatever about the ultimate safety and reliability of the South Texas Nuclear Project, the time to know this is now -- now, while corrective steps can be taken. If there is any possibility at all that this project will have to be modified, the time to act on that problem is now. It

would be far better to delay this plant now than it would to see it taken out of service or modified at great cost two or three years hence.

For that reason, I am requesting that your Commission act at once to review plants in progress, and particularly the South Texas Nuclear Project, with a view to determining what actions are needed, if any, to ensure that there is no doubt about their safety and serviceability. If this means delaying work in progress, it would be less costly to incur such delay than it would be to start anew with a finding down the line that containment buildings are not sufficient or that critical reactor components cannot be relied upon, or that safety systems must be redesigned and rebuilt.

Sincerely yours,

Henry Gonzalez

Henry B. Gonzalez
Member of Congress

via Special Delivery