



UNITED STATES
NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20555

FEB 9 1978

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The Honorable John G. Tower
United States Senate
Washington, D. C. 20510

Dear Senator Tower:

I am pleased to reply to your letter of December 20, 1977, to Chairman Hendrie regarding the recent Order issued by the Commission's Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation directing the General Electric Company to suspend operation of the General Electric Test Reactor (the GETR) at the Vallecitos Nuclear Center near Pleasanton, California. Since, as noted below, this matter may be considered by an Atomic Safety and Licensing Board (ASLB) and since an ASLB decision would be subject to review by the Commission, it would not be appropriate for the Chairman to respond to your letter at this time. Accordingly, it has been referred to me for reply.

You have urged that we take immediate steps, consistent with safe, accident-free operation, to permit resumption of GETR operations at the earliest possible time and thus resume the supply of radioisotopes from the GETR. You have also urged that we give serious consideration to the appointment of a special task force composed of competent, independent, private geological consultants to speed up the process of obtaining the necessary geological data upon which to base our decision regarding resumption of operation of the GETR.

The enclosure, "Matters of Concern in Connection with Nuclear Regulatory Commission's October 24, 1977 Show Cause Order to General Electric Company Relating to the General Electric Test Reactor," with its attachments provides a brief summary of the status and issues relevant to this facility.

As stated in the enclosure, public interest in this matter has been high. The NRC has been requested to hold public hearings on the Show Cause issue before allowing continued operation of the GETR. The Commission is currently reviewing two specific petitions - one from the Honorable Ronald V. Dellums and one from Friends of the Earth - which ask for a hearing before resumption of GETR operation is authorized. If these petitions are granted, the decision to allow interim operation rests with the Atomic Safety and Licensing Board. This Board will receive testimony from the NRC staff, General Electric Company and other hearing participants at a public hearing, on which its decision will be based.

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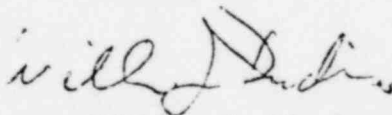
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We too were concerned about the potential impact that the GETR shutdown and resulting disruption of the supply of radioisotopes, particularly those for medical purposes, might have. Please refer to the October 28, 1977 memorandum (see Attachment 3 of the enclosure) from our radiopharmaceutical consultant, Captain William H. Briner, USPH (ret.) which summarizes the results of a comprehensive study, completed prior to the October 27, 1977 shutdown of the GETR, on current need and future supply of radionuclides which are essential for medical and industrial purposes. The study concluded that no significant shortage of medically important radionuclides should occur as a result of the GETR shutdown.

With regard to the appointment of a special task force to gain the necessary geological information as quickly as possible, we would like to point out that we have already asked the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the independent consulting firm of Newmark & Hall to provide consultation and advice in the areas of geology, seismology and structural analysis. We have also sought and obtained advice from the California Division of Mines and Geology in the area of landslides. It is our view that the establishment of a special task force at this time would not speed up the process, but would more likely require additional time. Because the geological features related to the GETR site are highly complex and the amount of actual hard data is very limited, considerable time would be required for such task force to provide a meaningful assessment involving (1) assimilation of the available data, (2) development of arguments to deal with concerns where no data is available, and (3) professional judgment based on researching the applicability of other seismic events at other places having somewhat highly competent geologists, seismologists and structural engineers who have been involved in this matter for some time and who are now in the process of analyzing the relevant data; the staff has also requested the assistance of USGS which has also been involved in the geologic investigation to date. Consequently, it is our opinion that the course of action we are presently pursuing will be the most expeditious way of proceeding to resolve our concerns.

We trust that the information provided in this letter and its enclosure is responsive to your concerns.

Sincerely,



William J. Dircks
Assistant Executive Director
for Operations

Enclosure:
Matters of Concern in Connection
with NRC's October 24, 1977
Show Cause Order to GE Relating
to the GETR

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