

U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Region II
101 Marietta St., N.W.
Suite 2900
Atlanta, GA 30323

No: II-96-36

Contact: Ken Clark (404) 331-5503
Roger Hannah (404) 331-7878

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NRC STAFF PROPOSES \$50,000 CIVIL PENALTY
AGAINST ST. LUCIE NUCLEAR POWER PLANT

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has proposed a \$50,000 civil penalty against Florida Power & Light Company for alleged violation of NRC safety requirements at the St. Lucie nuclear power plant, located on Hutchinson Island near Ft. Pierce, Florida.

NRC officials said the fine is being proposed because a Unit 1 control room operator on January 22, 1996 failed to follow procedures for diluting the boron concentration in the reactor coolant system, causing reactor power to rise above authorized limits for a short period of time.

Boron is used in reactors to absorb neutrons and help control the fission process. As reactor fuel ages, boron concentrations are diluted to help maintain operating power levels.

The NRC said the operator was diluting reactor coolant in a procedure requiring the addition of from 25 to 40 gallons of water which should have taken less than a minute to perform. Instead, the operator and other crew members conducted an inadequate watch turnover during which a temporary relief operator and the senior reactor operator were unaware that a boron dilution was in progress. This resulted in an unplanned reactivity increase since the operator failed to stop the addition of primary makeup water until approximately 400 gallons were added.

NRC officials said the actual safety consequences of the event were low because the operator recognized the error, and the crew took prompt actions to restore plant parameters. However, they said the event demonstrated operator performance problems because (1) the method routinely used by St. Lucie operators to dilute reactor coolant was not authorized by procedures; (2) the method used was not as described in an updated plant Final Safety Analysis Report; (3) operators routinely performed the dilution procedure from memory instead of referring to written procedures as required; and (4) operators failed to give prompt verbal notification to the Operations Supervisor that an unplanned reactivity change had occurred.

The company has 30 days from receipt of the Notice of Violation to either pay the fine or to protest its imposition.

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