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NRC STAFF APPROVES AMENDMENT FOR PALO VERDE
TO MOVE STUCK FUEL ASSEMBLY

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has approved a temporary license amendment that enables efforts to proceed to remove a fuel assembly stuck in the Unit 2 reactor vessel at the Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station near Buckeye, AZ. Arizona Public Service Co. personnel may remove the assembly tomorrow.

APS personnel experienced difficulty in removing the fuel assembly during routine refueling operations at the Unit 2 reactor on March 24 and subsequently determined that the assembly had suffered structural damage and was stuck in the reactor.

The NRC staff action authorizes a temporary change to Palo Verde's technical specifications that permits the plant to use a manually operated hoist rather than a refueling crane customarily used during refueling operations.

Use of the hoist is necessary because the fuel assembly is being reinforced, with metal plates on top and bottom and metal cables down the sides, to ensure its structural integrity. That increases the assembly's dimensions slightly, so that there is not sufficient clearance at certain points if the assembly was moved with the refueling crane.

NRC staff has reviewed Palo Verde's plans for the removal project as they developed over the last several days. They include the licensee's use of structural reinforcements to the assembly, notches in the lower end fitting of the assembly to relieve stress and the installation of hydraulic jacks beneath the assembly to boost it upwards.

Palo Verde has successfully removed the other 240 fuel assemblies from the reactor core earlier in the Unit 2 refueling outage. The remaining assembly is submerged in coolant water, and monitoring has indicated no damage to fuel pins and no release of radiation. The temporary license amendment approved by NRC staff will expire when the damaged fuel assembly has been moved to the unit's spent fuel pool.

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