UNITED STATES
NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION
REGION I
631 PARK AVENUE
KING OF PRUSSIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19406

May 28, 1987

Ms. Sarah Graves
Strout Road
Poland Spring, Maine 04274

Dear Ms. Graves:

Thank you for your letter of April 9, 1987, to our Washington Headquarters. It has recently been forwarded to my office for response.

As you ask a series of questions, I will first repeat the question and them attempt to answer it.

1. How many times a year does the NRC inspect Maine Yankee or does it?

A. The number of inspections varies from year to year, depending on activities at the plant; for example, there were 37 inspections done in 1985; 20 in 1986; and there have been 11 so far this year. There are monthly reports written by the resident inspectors who work out of an office at the site, and other specialists' reports, done by inspectors who have traveled from the Regional Office in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania to Maine Yankee to perform specific scheduled or special inspections in such areas as radiation or environmental protection, security and safeguards, quality assurance, etc.

2. Does the NRC regulate the amount of radioactive emissions that Maine Yankee releases into the atmosphere?

A. Yes, radioactive releases are limited to an amount that would keep the exposure of the people living near the plant to less than one-half rem per year. However, nuclear plants also are required to keep their releases and exposure of the public to levels that are as low as is reasonably achievable, and in the case of Maine Yankee, the releases in 1986 were a small fraction of what was permitted to be released. In 1986, such releases averaged about one half of one per cent of the NRC regulatory limit (in 10 CFR 50 Appendix I).

3. Recently, in the Portland Press Herald, it was reported that Maine Yankee had released higher than the average amounts of radioactive material into the atmosphere. What does the NRC do in cases like that? Do you fine the power plant? Where does the fine money go?

(more)

A. I don't know what the basis of that newspaper story was, but if you can send me a copy of it, I will try to clarify that for you. If that assertion is true, it does not mean that the amount released either was in excess of applicable regulatory limits, or that such a release was a serious enough violation to warrant an enforcement action greater than a citation; for example, a fine. When the NRC imposes fines on licensees, any money collected goes into the United States Treasury.

4. How many times since Maine Yankee has been operating have they been fined? (If you do fine them?)

A. Maine Yankee has paid the following fines, for the following kinds of violations:

- April 15, 1975, $4,000, for failure to conduct adequate background investigation of armed guards and failure to document guard training.
- April 23, 1982, $30,000, for failure to assure a properly sealed reactor containment and failure to notify the NRC of a plant condition that required shutting down the plant.
- June 17, 1983, $40,000, for operating while its backup high pressure coolant injection system, and emergency core cooling system, was inoperable,
- January 26, 1986, $80,000, for having two safety systems, the one that would automatically shut the plant down when the feedwater system becomes inoperable and one that would automatically shut the plant down when there is low steam pressure on the secondary side the steam generators, both rendered inoperable for more than a year.

5. Does the NRC have the authority to close down a plant if they feel its unsafe?

A. Yes, and also if we believe it is not being operated in a safe manner by the people in charge, even though the plant itself may not have equipment problems. At the present time there are nine plants shut down under NRC requirements or direct orders, and they may not be restarted without NRC's permission.

6. Does the NRC pay attention to reports such as that from the Massachusetts Bureau of Public Health? (regarding cancer rates in communities near the Pilgrim plant)

A. Yes, NRC pays attention. We are following the research effort underway in Massachusetts. NRC has the obligation to see that licensees use nuclear or radioactive materials without undue risk to workers or to the public, but NRC is not a Public Health Agency. We are unaware of any evidence supporting the claims made about various nuclear power plants in various locations around the country, at various times that releases of radioactive materials from these plants have caused any injuries or diseases observed in the communities around them.

7. Does the NRC ever do any independent testing like milk for strontium-90-etc. like Europe did after Chernobyl?

A. Yes, and no. The NRC has located around each of the 104 operating nuclear power plants in America passive radiation measuring devices that are "read" four times a year to keep track of total radiation around each plant in areas off the site. There are about 50 such measuring locations around each plant. Measurement of radioactivity by specific isotopes in air, local drinking water, milk, vegetation, and marine or seafood is required to be done by each nuclear power plant licensee and results reported to NRC regularly. NRC also, funds some independent laboratories in the states to collect and analyze such samples. There is a regular national network of milk sampling for strontium-90 and other radioactive substances that may fall in the United States from old and new atmospheric weapons testing or nuclear plant accidents, and that sampling is done by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Eastern Montgomery Laboratory in cooperative contracts with the States, and includes regular publication of milk sampling data, and special efforts when incidents such as Chernobyl take place.

Regarding your passing reference to selection of a high-level radioactive waste repository in the Northeast United States, that is not an NRC initiative, but an effort by the U.S. Department of Energy. I enclose a copy of the NRC regulations (10 CFR 60) that will be used to evaluate any application by DOE or its contractor to select a site and construct it, because NRC would have to issue a construction permit for such a project. For more information about the projected waste repositories, you may write to: Office of Public Affairs, Department of Energy, Washington, D.C. 20585.

(more)

I hope this information is helpful to you.

Sincerely,

Karl Abraham

Karl Abraham
Sr. Public Affairs Officer
Office of Governmental and
Public Affairs-Region I

Enclosure: As Stated

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SUN JOURNAL

Two reports claim nuclear safety down

By JAMES ROWLEY
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — A congressman and an anti-nuclear citizens group released separate reports on nuclear safety Saturday and charged that the industry's safety record is getting worse instead of better.

The Critical Mass Energy Project, a Ralph Nader group, released a study of safety violations reported to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission since 1979. The group said problems have been on the rise since then and called for a phase-out of all U.S. reactors.

Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., released a list of the 10 worst atomic power safety breaches provided to his subcommittee on energy conservation and power by the NRC. He said 1985 was the worst year for safety since the Three Mile Island accident in 1979.

"The number and severity of accidents during the past year is simply too close for comfort," Markey said. "The list of close calls strongly suggests that a major U.S. nuclear accident could be lurking around the corner."

Critical Mass said nuclear mishaps reported to the NRC rose from 2,310 in 1979 to 5,060 in 1983.

In 1984 the NRC instituted a new reporting system that yields about half as many mishap reports as the old one, the group said. Under the new system, it said, plant operators filed 2,417 "licensee event reports" on mishaps in 1984 and 2,974 in 1985.

The NRC report also included accounts of:

- The loss of electrical power and a "severe water hammer" or shuddering water pipes that caused a steam leak and damaged equipment at the San Onofre Unit 1 plant near San Clemente, Calif., on Nov. 21, 1985. Steam generator feedwater was lost for three minutes.
- An unusual power surge at the Virgil C. Summer Nuclear Station Unit 1 in Broad River, S.C., that caused the plant to automatically shut down while it was being started up by operators. Human error and procedure deficiencies were responsible for the Feb. 28, 1985 event, the NRC said.
- The failure of nine of 12 pressure transmitters that was discovered Aug. 7, 1985 at the Maine Yankee atomic power plant near Bath, Maine. The transmitters that monitor the pressure of three steam generators were inoperable because root valves had apparently been closed for more than a year.

Opinion

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Wednesday, May 7, 1986—PAGE 6