

January 12, 2000

The Honorable Sam Gejdenson
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Gejdenson:

I am responding to your letter of December 13, 1999, in which you expressed concerns about reports of reductions in Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) inspections at our nation's nuclear power plants as part of our revised reactor oversight process. I want to reassure you that the revised process is intended to improve our inspection and other oversight programs by better focusing our resources on the most safety significant aspects of nuclear power plant performance.

We believe the revised oversight process represents an improvement over the NRC's previous oversight processes, which included the Systematic Assessment of Licensee Performance and Senior Management Meeting processes, and will provide assurance that licensees maintain the current overall level of safety. The revised reactor oversight process provides for the use of objective indicators along with inspections in key areas to enable the NRC and licensees to identify significant performance issues. The process provides for a more consistent and objective assessment process that focuses appropriate regulatory attention on facilities with performance problems, while at the same time reducing regulatory burden on those facilities that perform well.

The NRC staff recently completed a pilot program for the revised reactor oversight process at nine sites and will be forwarding the results to the Commission in February. We are currently scheduled to begin implementation of the revised reactor oversight process in April and after the first year of implementation of the new oversight process at all sites, the NRC will complete a comprehensive review of the utilization of inspection resources.

As you pointed out in your letter, America's nuclear power plants are among the safest in the world. As a result of improved industry safety performance and of the desire to be as efficient a regulator as possible, the NRC has reduced inspection effort somewhat in recent years. These reductions have not impacted the safety performance of the industry. The comprehensive staffing review discussed above, combined with the insights gained from greater experience with the revised oversight process will enable the Commission to ensure that the agency's inspection resources are adequate.

The Commission also shares your concern about aging issues. Although the Commission typically licensed these facilities for 40 years of operation, the NRC continuously examines safety issues that arise for applicability to the plants and ensures that the issues are appropriately addressed. The NRC is currently conducting a thorough analysis of aging-related issues as part of its reviews of the first two license renewal applications submitted by the industry. Through these reviews, ongoing research into aging issues, and monitoring of operating information, the NRC believes that age-related issues for our nation's plants are being appropriately monitored and addressed.

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Please contact me if you have any additional questions on this matter.

Sincerely,

/s/

Richard A. Meserve

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Sincerely,

/s/

Richard A. Meserve

Originating Office: EDO
Ref: CR-00-0002
Commission Correspondence

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OFC	SECY	OCA	OCM/RAM		
NAME	ESWilliams	D. Rathbun	R. A. Meserve		
DATE	01/11/00	01/11/00	01/12/00		

The Honorable Sam Gejdenson
 United States House of Representatives
 Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Gejdenson:

I am responding to your letter of December 13, 1999, in which you expressed concerns about reports of reductions in Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) inspections at our nation's nuclear power plants as part of our revised reactor oversight process. I want to reassure you that the NRC has not made any decisions that inspections will be reduced in the future as a result of the revised reactor oversight process, nor is that the intent of the process. Instead, the revised process is intended to improve our inspection and other oversight programs by better focusing our resources on the most safety significant aspects of nuclear power plant performance.

As you pointed out in your letter, America's nuclear power plants are among the safest in the world. We believe the revised oversight process represents an improvement over the NRC's previous oversight processes, which included the Systematic Assessment of Licensee Performance and Senior Management Meeting processes, and will provide assurance that licensees maintain the current overall level of safety. The revised reactor oversight process provides for the use of objective indicators along with inspections in key areas to enable the NRC and licensees to identify significant performance issues. The process provides for a more consistent and objective assessment process that will focus appropriate regulatory attention on facilities with performance problems, while at the same time reducing regulatory burden on those facilities that perform well.

The NRC staff recently completed a pilot program for the revised reactor oversight process at nine sites and will be forwarding the results to the Commission early next year. However, it would be premature to make any final determinations as to the inspection resources that will be required. Therefore, while we are currently scheduled to begin implementation of the revised reactor oversight process in the Spring of 2000, the NRC will defer any resource decisions until after the first year of implementation of the new oversight process at all sites.

The Commission also shares your concern about aging issues. Although the Commission typically licensed these facilities for 40 years of operation, the NRC continuously examines safety issues that arise for applicability to the plants and ensures that the issues are appropriately addressed. The NRC is currently conducting a thorough analysis of aging-related issues as part of its reviews of the first two license renewal applications submitted by the industry. Through these reviews, ongoing research into aging issues, and monitoring of operating information, the NRC believes that age-related issues for our nation's plants are being appropriately monitored and addressed.

I trust this reply responds to your concerns.

Sincerely,

Richard A. Meserve

This correspondence addresses policy issues previously resolved by the Commission, transmits factual information, or restates Commission policy

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