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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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NRC STAFF PROPOSES TO FINE GULF STATES UTILITIES  
\$50,000 FOR VIOLATIONS AT RIVER BEND STATION

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has informed Gulf States Utilities (GSU) that it proposes to fine the company \$50,000 for apparent violations of NRC requirements at the River Bend Station near St. Francisville, Louisiana.

GSU has 30 days to respond to the NRC citation. During that time, it may pay the civil penalty or protest it. If a protest is denied, the company may ask for a hearing.

The violations on which this enforcement action is based concern the operation of interlock mechanisms associated with containment airlock doors at the River Bend plant. Airlocks, special portals used for entering and leaving nuclear power plant containment buildings, are designed so that one enters the airlock through one door, which should then be closed before the other door is opened. They are intended to prevent a direct pathway from the containment interior to the outside environment in case of a release of radioactive materials. At the River Bend plant, a combination of electrical and mechanical interlocks is designed to keep both doors from being open at the same time.

NRC conducted a special inspection February 25-March 30 of this year after GSU informed the agency that problems had been encountered with a mechanical interlock and that containment integrity had been breached for about one minute when a worker entered the containment building.

That inspection found that GSU had operated the plant from October 1990 until March 1993 with inoperable electrical containment entry interlocks after de-energizing them when operational problems were encountered. Inspectors also found that GSU took this action without analyzing the safety implications of this modification. And they further found that, during the October 1990-March 1993 time frame, GSU did not perform required periodic tests to assure that only one airlock door could be opened at a time. Since the plant was licensed in November 1985, GSU has documented three brief instances of

containment integrity being breached -- once in 1986 and twice in February of this year.

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NRC is citing the utility for (1) failure to perform an adequate safety evaluation when the electrical containment entry interlock was disabled; (2) failure to maintain the airlock interlock mechanisms in an operable condition, as required by the plant license; and (3) failure to test the airlock adequately to assure that only one airlock door could be opened at a time.

In his letter informing GSU of the civil penalty, James L. Milhoan, NRC regional administrator in Arlington, Texas, said the agency considers the most significant shortcoming to be the company's failure to recognize the rationale in the plant's design for maintaining the containment airlock electrical interlock mechanisms. "Modifying the design of the facility. . . and not conducting an adequate safety analysis to determine whether the modification created an unreviewed safety question are of significant regulatory concern to the NRC," he said.

Mr. Milhoan acknowledged that the actual safety threat was minimal because the three brief breaches of containment integrity which have occurred were each promptly recognized and corrected at the time. He also said GSU has now enhanced its procedures to assure proper operation of the interlock systems and to test them properly, as well as to see that safety implications are analyzed when any facility modifications are made.

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