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Tel. 301-415-8200

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NRC PROVIDES GUIDANCE ON FIRE PROTECTION REQUIREMENTS FOR THERMO-LAG FIRE BARRIERS

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has approved a staff recommendation that the Commission's existing fire protection requirements continue to be used to assess the adequacy of Thermo-Lag fire barriers which are installed in many NRC-licensed nuclear power plants. The Commission, in a June 27 memorandum, also approved the staff's recommendation that it consider plant-specific requests for exemptions from these requirements on a case-by-case basis.

Thermo-Lag fire barriers are used to protect electrical equipment needed to safely shut down nuclear power plants and, to meet existing NRC requirements, must provide fire protection for a period of three hours or, if fire detection and suppression equipment is installed, a period of one hour.

The staff concluded, in April 1992, that Thermo-Lag fire barriers may not provide the levels of fire resistance required by the NRC's regulations and an action plan was developed to address these concerns. Since then, utility licensees have treated the barriers installed in their nuclear power plants as inoperable and have instituted compensatory measures such as fire watches.

Licensees have a number of options for complying with existing regulations including: replacing Thermo-Lag fire barriers with fire barriers that meet the requirements; upgrading existing Thermo-Lag fire barriers; reevaluating electrical equipment protected by Thermo-Lag to determine if it is needed for safe shutdown; rerouting electrical equipment to eliminate the need for fire barriers; reevaluating licensing commitments that may exceed regulatory requirements; requesting exemptions or some combination of these actions.

The Commission, in its June 27 memorandum, also approved the staff's recommendation to proceed with the development of a new, performance-based fire protection rule as part of its continuing program for regulatory improvement or in response to a request for rulemaking. The Commission emphasized, however, that a new

rule should not be considered a means to resolve the Thermo-Lag issue.