

May 13, 2011

The Honorable Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Blumenthal:

On behalf of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), I am responding to your letter of March 15, 2011, which raised a number of important questions and concerns regarding recent events in Japan and their implications for the continuing safety of nuclear power plants in the United States.

Japan is still focused on stabilizing the conditions of its damaged nuclear power plants. The NRC's Emergency Operations Center continues to monitor and assess events, and to provide expert assistance and review. We are focused on meeting the near-term technical and information needs of the Japanese Government, various components of the Executive Branch, Members of Congress, and the American public, while ensuring there is no reduction in the domestic regulatory and oversight functions of the NRC.

We expect that decisions regarding our domestic regulatory program based on lessons learned from the events in Japan will be made over the course of the next 6 – 9 months. During this time, the NRC staff will implement the Commission's March 23rd direction to establish a senior level task force to conduct a methodical and systematic review of our processes and regulations to determine whether the agency should make additional improvements to our regulatory system. This activity will have both near-term and longer-term components.

For the near-term effort, the task force has begun a 90-day review. This review will evaluate all of the currently available information from the Japanese events to identify immediate or near-term operational or regulatory issues potentially affecting the 104 operating reactors in the U.S., including their spent fuel pools. Areas of investigation will include the ability to protect against natural disasters, response to station blackouts, severe accidents and spent fuel accident management, radiological consequence analysis, and emergency preparedness issues. Over this 90-day period, the NRC staff will develop recommendations, as appropriate, for enhancements to inspection procedures and licensing review guidance, and will recommend whether generic communications, orders, or other regulatory requirements are needed. This 90-day effort will include a briefing of the Commission after approximately 30 days to provide an early snapshot of the status of the task force's considerations based on information available at that time.

The NRC's longer-term review will begin as soon as the NRC staff has sufficient technical information from the events in Japan, with a goal of commencing no later than the completion of the 90-day near-term report. The task force will evaluate all technical and policy issues related to the events to identify any additional potential research, generic issues, changes to the reactor oversight process, rulemakings, and modifications to the regulatory framework that should be considered by the NRC. A report with appropriate recommendations will be provided to the Commission within six months after the start of this evaluation. Both the 90-day and final reports will be made publicly available in accordance with normal Commission processes as well as provided to the Commission's Advisory Committee on Reactor Safeguards for its independent review.

With those plans in place and underway, we also are currently pursuing prudent actions. Specifically, we have begun inspection activities through temporary instructions to our inspection staff, including the resident inspectors and the region-based inspectors in our four Regional offices, to look at licensees' readiness to deal with both design basis accidents and beyond-design basis accidents. We have also issued an information notice to our licensees to make them aware of the events in Japan. In addition to the current requirements, nuclear power plant licensees are voluntarily verifying that their capabilities to mitigate conditions that result from severe accidents, including the loss of significant operational and safety systems, are in effect and operational. The NRC will take additional immediate actions that we believe to be appropriate as our understanding of the events in Japan becomes clearer.

Let me assure you that our ongoing monitoring of events in Japan and review of all available information leads us to conclude that U.S. plants continue to operate safely. Let me also assure you that our review will be systematic and methodical. We will take whatever actions are determined necessary in light of the information we receive.

I want to reiterate that we continue to view our domestic responsibilities for licensing and oversight of U.S. licensees as our top priority, and that we are dedicated to ensuring U.S. nuclear plants continue to operate safely. I look forward to being able to provide you with additional information as it becomes available. If you have any additional questions, please contact me or Ms. Rebecca Schmidt, Director of the Office of Congressional Affairs, at (301) 415-1776.

Sincerely,

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Gregory B. Jaczko