

July 16, 2011

The Honorable Al Franken  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Franken:

On behalf of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), I am responding to your letter of May 18, 2011, concerning the safety of U.S. nuclear power reactors.

As you know, the NRC's mission is to regulate the nation's civilian use of byproduct, source, and special nuclear materials to ensure adequate protection of public health and safety, to promote the common defense and security, and to protect the environment. The agency's strategic goals and organizational values reaffirm this mission and guide our work on a daily basis. We have always made oversight of U.S. licensees our top priority in order to protect public health and safety.

The NRC has a long history of, and commitment to, transparency, participation, and collaboration in our regulatory activities. As a result of the nuclear emergency in Japan, the NRC's actions are being followed by the public, policymakers, and other stakeholders even more closely than before.

The NRC is committed to ensuring that the agency's review and evaluation of the events in Japan will be as transparent as possible. We have established a near-term task force to conduct a 90-day review of currently available information. The Commission has held public meetings at 30-day intervals to review the progress of this task force, and the task force is expected to provide its report and recommendations to the Commission in a public meeting to be held on July 19, 2011. We also will undertake a longer-term review as soon as the staff has sufficient technical information regarding the events in Japan, with a goal of commencing with the completion of the 90-day near-term report. As each review progresses, the Commission will be briefed periodically by staff in public meetings that are simultaneously webcast; the first two Commission meetings with the Task Force were held May 12 and June 15, 2011. Additionally, the NRC staff will prepare reports concerning the events in Japan and documenting our assessment of whether NRC should make any improvements to our regulatory system. Those reports will be publicly available and there will be several opportunities for external stakeholder involvement, particularly during the long-term review.

The NRC's review will consider many of the issues raised in your letter, including the containment venting systems of Mark I reactors, station blackout, and the operability of facility diesel generators. With respect to the nuclear reactors in Minnesota, recent inspections carried out at both Prairie Island Nuclear Generating Plant and Monticello Nuclear Generating Plant indicated that both facilities were satisfactorily maintaining the equipment and strategies required to mitigate the effects of a range of possible events. This included the capability to mitigate station blackout conditions and fires in large areas of the plant, and to respond to beyond design basis events involving fires, floods, and seismic events. Subsequent inspections

to review implementation of Severe Accident Management Guidelines found several shortcomings at both facilities in the areas of updating procedures and related staff training. The NRC is working through its Reactor Oversight Process to verify that as part of their corrective action process, the licensees ensure that the identified shortcomings are addressed.

Regarding the 2008 Government Accountability Office (GAO) Audit Report on fire protection at U.S. nuclear power plants, the GAO made four recommendations regarding the oversight of fire protection at such facilities. Since that report was issued, the NRC has reported regularly to several Committees of the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives on our plans to address these recommendations and our progress in doing so. In letters submitted in April 2009 and March 2010, the NRC reported that we had completed our actions in response to GAO's four recommendations and closed our response. Our Office of Congressional Affairs has provided you with copies of those letters and is available to answer any questions you might have.

We appreciate hearing your views and thank you for your interest in these matters.

Sincerely,

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Gregory B. Jaczko