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SAM GEJDENSON
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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

December 15, 1999

The Honorable Richard Meserve
Chairman
Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Washington, DC 20555

Dear Chairman Meserve:

I am writing after reading an article in the *New London Day* which describes how the Commission will allow nuclear power plants to operate outside of their technical specifications under certain circumstances as we make the transition from 1999 to 2000. I urge you to ensure that Resident Inspectors and other Commission personnel exercise vigorous oversight of any such operations to ensure that an adequate margin of safety is maintained at all times.

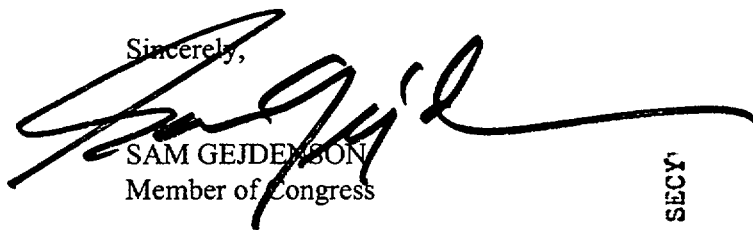
We all recognize that the transition from 1999 to 2000 could involve a number of unexpected events, including disruption of some aspects of the nation's power supply. Planning for possible scenarios is the prudent course of action. I also recognize that maintaining electrical power is crucial to our ability to respond to a wide array of other potential problems. Therefore, it makes sense to take steps designed to ensure that power plants, including nuclear plants, will remain operational and that the integrity of our power grid will be protected.

At the same time, it is imperative that these steps not undermine public safety. It would be ironic if in an effort to protect public safety by ensuring the continued operation of nuclear power plants, the Commission's action inadvertently diminished that safety through other means. Allowing plants to operate outside of their technical specifications without extremely clear standards and strict oversight could produce this unintended consequence.

With this in mind, I urge you to ensure that Resident Inspectors and regional personnel have clear guidelines to follow in determining which specifications can be waived on a temporary basis. Moreover, NRC staff must exercise vigorous, on-site oversight of plant operations during this transitional period. Finally, I believe it is important for you to stress that any waiver granted is a temporary action in response to extraordinary circumstances and in no way diminishes the importance of such standards during normal plant operations.

I appreciate your willingness to consider my views. I believe it is important for the Commission to take these steps to ensure the highest level of public safety is maintained during this period.

Sincerely,



SAM GEJDENSON
Member of Congress

SG:sk

NRC safety policy relaxed for New Year's

By **PAUL CHOINIERE**
Day Staff Writer

It's shortly after midnight on Jan. 1 and sections of the nation's power grid are experiencing Y2K problems. Nuclear plants, which are connected to the grid, are having their own, added difficulties. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, with no time for a detailed evaluation, gives the OK for the plants to keep operating.

The NRC considers such a scenario realistic enough to have approved a special, unprecedented policy that allows nuclear plants to keep operating with technical problems that would normally force them to shut down. Critics, however, contend the policy gives operators too much leeway to go outside their plant designs

and may set the stage for a nuclear accident.

Under the plan, the NRC is allowing nuclear plants to stray outside their "technical specifications." Among the plants expected to be operating are Millstone 2 and 3 in Waterford.

Though both the agency and the industry say they think all significant Y2K problems have been eliminated, the NRC has the contingency in case they are wrong.

Dick Wessman, deputy director of engineering at the NRC's office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation in Maryland, said the policy would come into play only if the power grid in a region becomes unstable and a blackout is possible. If, at the same time, a nuclear plant were having its own problems, the reactor operators can ask the NRC for permission to continue operations

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NRC to let nuclear plants avoid normal rules

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to help keep electricity flowing. NRC approval, Wessman said, would be given only if the decrease in safety were small.

An example of an allowed problem, Wessman said, might be the loss of one back-up system for cooling the reactor. This is the type of system needed only if multiple primary cooling systems fail.

Paul Gunter, director of the Reactor Watchdog Project, said the policy amounts to "a furlough from safety."

"The power grid has become more important to the NRC than its role of protecting the public from the radiation that could result from a nuclear accident," said Gunter, whose organization is part of the Nuclear Information and Resource Service in Washington, D.C.

Gunter's organization has recommended that the nation's 103 nuclear

plants either be placed in a standby mode — the equivalent of a car idling in park — or be shut down entirely for several days, until the Y2K threat passes.

The blackout threat

Though the power industry has assured Congress it is ready to move into the year 2000, the potential for blackouts cannot be ruled out, both utility industry critics and emergency planners agree. Emergency planners fear blackouts could trigger public panic. A national task force that reviewed the Y2K issue for the NRC warned that the "failure to provide electricity to customers at this critical time may have adverse impact on public health and safety."

The Union of Concerned Scientists had urged the NRC to establish guidelines on how far outside of its technical specifications a plant would be allowed to operate. The

agency, Wessman said, opted to decide on a case-by-case basis, because it is impossible to predict what might happen.

Another factor in the NRC's decision to keep plants operating is the possible problem a blackout could cause for the plants themselves. Nuclear plants in this country do not run on their own power; they use electricity coming off the grid. If the grid fails, a condition known as "station blackout" is declared. Back-up batteries must be used to keep all systems running and the reactor cool. Power is then transferred to back-up diesel generators.

David Lochbaum, a safety engineer with the Union of Concerned Scientists, said 40 percent of all reactor accident scenarios involve loss of off-site power. The NRC task force warned "an unreliable grid can adversely affect nuclear power plant safety."

But, Gunter said, there is possible danger in the NRC trying to keep the grid going.

He described this scenario:

The power grid becomes unstable, and one or more reactors are allowed to keep operating with certain technical problems. Then, despite the plants' continued operation, the grid fails.

That, said Gunter, might leave the plants in a dangerous "station blackout" with existing technical problems.

The NRC does not expect that the special exception will be needed anywhere, Wessman said, because nuclear plants and the power grid nationwide should run well through New Year's Eve and New Year's Day.

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