

Ms. Rose Norberg
6009 Kalaniana'ole Highway
Honolulu, Hawaii 96821-2311

Dear Ms. Norberg:

Your postcard dated September 30, 1999, to Secretary Bill Richardson of the U. S. Department of Energy (DOE) was referred to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) for response as we are the federal agency responsible for the oversight of nuclear power plants and gaseous diffusion plants. In your postcard, you express concerns regarding a potential decrease in the amount of inspections these plants will receive and that old nuclear power plants should be closed.

The NRC performs inspections of both nuclear power plants and gaseous diffusion plants. With respect to nuclear power plants, we are currently revising our reactor oversight process. The new process takes into account improvements in the performance of the nuclear industry over the past twenty years and the desire of the NRC to apply more objective, timely, safety-significant criteria in assessing performance, as well as the agency's need to effectively regulate the nuclear industry with a smaller staff and budget. I want to reassure you that the revised process is intended to improve our inspection and other oversight programs by better focusing our resources on the most safety significant aspects of nuclear power plant performance. We believe the revised oversight process represents an improvement over the NRC's previous oversight processes, which included the Systematic Assessment of Licensee Performance and Senior Management Meeting processes, and will provide assurance that licensees maintain the current overall level of safety. The revised reactor oversight process provides for the use of objective indicators along with inspections in key areas to enable the NRC and licensees to identify significant performance issues. The process provides for a more consistent and objective assessment process that focuses appropriate regulatory attention on facilities with performance problems, while at the same time reducing regulatory burden on those facilities that perform well.

We recently completed a pilot program for the revised reactor oversight process at nine sites and will be forwarding the results to the Commission this month. Pending approval, we are currently scheduled to begin implementation of the revised reactor oversight process in April and after the first year of implementation of the new oversight process at all sites, the NRC will complete a comprehensive review of the utilization of inspection resources. This review, along with the insights gained from greater experience with the revised reactor oversight process will enable the Commission to ensure that the agency's inspection resources are adequate. More information concerning the revised reactor oversight process is available on the NRC web-page (<http://www.nrc.gov/NRR/OVERSIGHT/index.html>).

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As noted above, the NRC also has oversight responsibility for the nation's two gaseous diffusion plants (GDPs) in Ohio and Kentucky. We acquired oversight of these plants from the DOE in March, 1997. DOE still has control over certain portions of these plants, including decontamination and clean-up efforts. These plants have provided much of the world's supply of enriched uranium through more than forty years of safe operation. The NRC assures safety at the GDPs through two full-time resident inspectors at each site, in addition to conducting frequent safety, safeguards, and environmental inspections by NRC safety specialists. NRC is committed to protecting the health and safety of the public through its GDP certification and inspection programs. More information concerning our GDP oversight program is available on the NRC web-page (<http://www.nrc.gov/NMSS/FCSS/fcssindex.html>).

With respect to the need to close old nuclear power plants, the Commission typically licensed these facilities for 40 years of operation. We continuously examine safety issues that arise for applicability to the plants and ensure that these issues are appropriately addressed. In addition, the NRC is evaluating aging-related issues as part of its reviews of the first license renewal applications submitted by the industry. Through these reviews, ongoing research into aging issues, and monitoring of operating information, the NRC believes that age-related issues for our nation's plants are being appropriately monitored and addressed.

If you require additional information or clarification of any material provided or referenced, please feel free to contact Mr. John Monninger of my staff at (301) 415-3495 or me.

Sincerely,

Jon R. Johnson
Associate Director for Inspection and Programs
Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation

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Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation

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