

February 29, 2000

The Honorable Sam Gejdenson
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Gejdenson:

I am responding to your letter of February 11, 2000, in which you expressed concerns about the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission's (NRC's) recent policy change regarding the number of resident inspectors required to staff multiple unit nuclear power plant sites. The NRC resident inspector program has been and will continue to be an important element of our overall oversight program for these facilities. The Commission's decision establishes an interim staffing policy until the NRC can complete a comprehensive review of inspector staffing associated with the revised reactor oversight process, as discussed in my letter to you of January 12, 2000. I would like to respond to your concerns by first explaining the context for our recent policy change.

Resident inspectors provide an on-site resource to monitor performance and respond to operational events at the nation's power plants. In 1988, the NRC established a policy requiring one more resident inspector at a site than the number of reactors at that site. The Commission's revised policy requires a minimum of two resident inspectors at single and two-unit sites, and a minimum of three inspectors at three unit sites. Until guidance is developed as a result of a broader staffing study to be completed in June 2001, NRC will not reassign resident inspectors solely to implement the new policy. Thus, this action only affects those reactor sites where a resident inspector position becomes vacant before the comprehensive review is completed.

The revised policy does not in and of itself reduce our total inspection resources or the agency's ability to complete planned inspection program requirements. Rather, it enhances the agency's flexibility in applying inspection resources by basing more of the inspector positions in our four regional offices. Regional Administrators can deploy these inspection resources when and where they are most needed, including allocating additional resident inspectors to plant sites if utility performance warrants. Moreover, this flexibility can be particularly beneficial in the oversight of aging issues, since more specialized inspection expertise usually resides in our regional offices. The revised policy is also expected to improve the effectiveness of our oversight process by applying the broader perspective of region-based inspectors to the

specific performance issues faced by individual plants. In addition, experience with plants such as Millstone has illustrated that focus by region-based inspectors on selected areas of plant performance, such as engineering or corrective action programs, is an effective means of providing oversight of these areas.

The Millstone facility is a unique site, in part because of its past performance, and in part because of the different expertise required to inspect the two different types of reactors at the site. NRC has determined that resident inspector staffing will be maintained at the current level at the site until the broader staffing study is completed. We will then re-evaluate staffing at the site in accordance with the guidelines established by the study.

In summary, the Commission believes that this policy change enhances NRC's ability to allocate resources on the basis of licensee performance while we are becoming more efficient. Please contact me if you have any additional questions on this matter.

Sincerely,

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Richard A. Meserve