United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Office of Public Affairs
Washington, DC 20555
Phone 301-415-8200 Fax 301-415-2234
Internet:opa@nrc.gov

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NRC AUDITING NUCLEAR POWER PLANT YEAR 2000 READINESS PROGRAMS

As part of its efforts to address the Year 2000 problem, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has begun a series of audits that will examine 12 nuclear power plants throughout the nation to spot-check measures licensees are taking to assure that key computer systems will function in the year 2000 and beyond.

The process, which will extend through January, started this month with audits at the Monticello nuclear power plant in Minnesota and the Seabrook plant in New Hampshire. Other plants will be audited as follows:

October: Brunswick (North Carolina), Hope Creek (New Jersey) and Davis Besse (Ohio).
November: Wolf Creek (Kansas), Watts Bar (Tennessee), and Limerick (Pennsylvania).
December: Waterford (Louisiana).
January: North Anna (Virginia), Braidwood (Illinois), and WNP-2 (Washington State).

Results of the audits will be used to determine if NRC needs to take further regulatory action. Based on preliminary findings during early audits or other relevant emerging information, NRC may need to adjust these schedules and may consider conducting audits at other plants.

The NRC selected plants for the Year 2000 audit based primarily on the following criteria:

-- Three plants located in each of NRC's four regions;
-- Plants designed by all four vendors (Babcock & Wilcox, General Electric, Combustion Engineering, and Westinghouse);
-- Plants of different ages; and
-- Extent of use of computer systems in plants.

The "Year 2000" problem refers to computers' potential inability to recognize 21st Century dates beginning with January 1, 2000, and beyond. It is caused by computer programs that use two-digit numbers to represent a calendar year (such as "98" for 1998). If the problem

is not corrected, vulnerable computer systems will read “00" as 1900, rather than 2000, possibly causing some plant systems or equipment to malfunction.

Thus far, NRC has no indication that such computer-related problems exist with safety-related systems in nuclear power plants. “Year 2000" problems have been found in non-safety, but nevertheless important computer-based applications, such as security computers, control room display systems, engineering programs, control systems, radiation monitoring, and emergency response.

In January, the NRC issued a letter to all licensed utilities with operational nuclear power plants requiring that they inform the NRC of steps they have taken or will take to deal with the Year 2000 problem. All licensees have responded that they are implementing programs designed to assure that computer systems will operate effectively into the 21st Century. All have indicated they will follow a program similar to the NRC-endorsed industry guide for Year 2000 readiness programs.

By July 1, 1999, licensees must submit a written response confirming that their plants are or will be Year 2000 ready at the turn of the century and if not, must provide a status report, including completion schedules for work remaining to ensure Year 2000 readiness.

A workshop is planned for December with the Nuclear Energy Institute, an industry organization, to share information gathered during the audits and to discuss licensee efforts at addressing the Year 2000 problem.

In addition to regulatory oversight of its licensees with regard to the Year 2000 problem, the NRC supports the activities of the President’s Council on Year 2000 Conversion and is a member of the Council’s Year 2000 working group dealing with electric power.

More information about the Year 2000 problem can be found at the NRC Internet web page at: http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/NEWS/year2000.html. Details about the NRC audit plan can be found at: http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/Y2k/y2kaudit.html.

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