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NRC ASSESSES PERFORMANCE OF VERMONT YANKEE NUCLEAR POWER PLANT;
OVERALL RATING IS 'GOOD,' WITH DECLINE NOTED IN PLANT SUPPORT

The Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant has received ratings of "good" in all four categories evaluated in the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's latest assessment of the facility's performance. Located in Vernon, Vt., the boiling-water reactor is owned and operated by the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corporation.

Covered by the latest Systematic Assessment of Licensee Performance, or SALP, report for Vermont Yankee is the period from January 19, 1997, through July 18.

NRC staff and Vermont Yankee officials will discuss the evaluation during a meeting scheduled for 1 p.m. on Wednesday, September 16, at the plant. It will be open to the public for observation, and agency staff will remain afterwards to answer questions from members of the press and public.

The agency's SALP reports rate four functional areas of nuclear power plant performance: plant operations, maintenance, engineering and plant support. Ratings of Category 1 ("superior"), Category 2 ("good") and Category 3 ("acceptable") are assigned. The reports are issued roughly once every 18 months for each plant.

While the areas of plant operations, maintenance and engineering retained "good" ratings since Vermont Yankee's last SALP report in March 1997, the rating for the plant support area declined from "superior" to "good."

Overall, the NRC found performance at Vermont Yankee to be good during the period. "Senior management was involved in plant activities at a level that resulted in several improvements to plant performance," NRC Region I Administrator Hubert J. Miller wrote to plant officials regarding the report. "Management established a lowered threshold for problem reporting, improving problem identification."

Still, several weaknesses were identified, specifically in the areas of procedure quality, event reporting and contractor oversight, Mr. Miller noted.

In the area of operations, improvements were seen in operator communication and performance. However, errors by operators continued to contribute to unplanned plant events, and weaknesses were identified in the procedures used to control operations.

The maintenance area saw good performance in equipment testing and in on-line preventive and corrective maintenance activities. Also, the plant's material condition was very good. On the negative side, there were examples of weak oversight and control of work during the most recent refueling outage, and several deficiencies were observed in testing procedures.

Engineering was effective when it came to identifying numerous design and licensing basis issues, but root cause evaluations and corrective actions for some issues were determined to be neither comprehensive nor timely. Management of the engineering issues backlog continued to pose a challenge.

Performance in the area of plant support declined, with weak initial radiological controls in effect during significant outage work involving modifications to the torus, the doughnut-shaped coolant storage structure at the base of the facility. While the security program was found to be satisfactory, problems were noted in the perimeter alarm system and in personnel searches.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Copies of NRC SALP reports are available on the agency's Internet site at www.nrc.gov.