UNITED STATES
NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20555-0001

October 14, 1998

Ms. Colleen Coogan
National Marine Fisheries Service
Southeast Region
Protected Species Division
9721 Executive Center Drive North
St. Petersburg, FL 33702

SUBJECT: BIOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF IMPACTS TO SEA TURTLES AT CRYSTAL RIVER ENERGY COMPLEX (TAC NO. MA1706)

Dear Ms. Coogan:

In accordance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA or the Act) and 50 CFR Part 402 - Interagency Cooperation - Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) requests initiation of formal consultation regarding the taking of endangered and threatened species of sea turtles at the Crystal River Energy Complex located near the Gulf of Mexico in Citrus County, Florida. To support the formal consultation process, the enclosed biological assessment (BA) is submitted for your review. The BA was developed after the NRC became aware of increases in the numbers of stranded sea turtles at the Crystal River Energy Complex. The issue was discussed during a May 13, 1998, meeting at the Crystal River site between yourself, representing the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the Florida Power Corporation (FPC, the licensee for the Crystal River site), the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), and the NRC. The BA, prepared by FPC and submitted to the NRC by letter dated October 1, 1998, assesses the impacts associated with continued operations at the Crystal River site on sea turtles protected under the Act.

The BA outlines the historical sea turtle take trends. Since the five electric generating plants (4 coal, 1 nuclear) began operation at the Crystal River site, relatively few endangered sea turtles have been observed in the vicinity of the power plant intake canal. However, in early 1998, a significant increase occurred in the number of Kemp's ridley sea turtles sighted and captured in the intake canal. A total of 38 sea turtles were rescued and released between February and May 1998. Of those, 37 were Kemp's ridley turtles. One green sea turtle was rescued. A total of 13 sea turtle mortalities have been recorded. Eight of those can be attributed to factors other than operation of the power plants (boat collisions, etc.), while 5 are believed to be attributable to plant operation (stranding and subsequent drowning on the intake bar racks or traveling screens).

As a result of the increase in sea turtle occurrences, FPC implemented a number of sea turtle protective activities. These included increased sea turtle observation in the intake canal (24-hour watch, seven days a week, during peaks in turtle occurrences), development of sea turtle rescue and handling guidelines, obtaining a permit from the FDEP to handle stranded sea turtles and participate in the sea turtle stranding and salvage network, implementation of a pilot

program for sea turtle netting, and increased frequency of intake bar rack cleaning. These activities are described in more detail in the enclosed BA. Also discussed in the BA are other potential impacts on sea turtles as a result of site operations. These include thermal effects, barge activity, chlorination, use of Clam-trol, condenser cleaning systems, and intake canal dredging. FPC concluded the cumulative impact of site activities have not had any observed detrimental effect on the sea turtle population.

The NRC has reviewed the BA. The staff agrees with the FPC conclusion that the protective measures implemented are effective in protecting sea turtles, and believes that continued operations at the Crystal River Energy Complex will not jeopardize the continued existence of the five species of sea turtles evaluated in the BA. The NRC requests that NMFS provide its biological opinion (BO) by March 1, 1999. If you have any questions, please contact Ms. Claudia M. Craig at (301) 415-1053.

Sincerely,

Thomas H Essig, Acting Chief
Generic Issues and Environmental
Projects Branch
Division of Reactor Program Management
Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation

Docket No. 50-302

Enclosure: Biological Assessment

cc w/encl: See next page