



NRC NEWS

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NRC FINDS VALVE FAILURE AT BROWNS FERRY TO BE OF HIGH SAFETY SIGNIFICANCE

The U. S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has concluded that the failure of a low pressure coolant injection valve last fall at the Browns Ferry nuclear plant was of “high safety significance” and will result in increased NRC inspection and oversight of the facility.

The three-unit plant, operated by The Tennessee Valley Authority, is located near Athens, Ala., about 32 miles west of Huntsville.

NRC inspection findings are evaluated using a safety significance scale with four levels, ranging from “green” for minor significance, through “white” and “yellow” to “red” for high significance.

On Oct. 23, 2010, the valve failed to open when operators attempted to use the residual heat removal shutdown cooling loop during Unit 1 refueling. TVA later determined that the last time the valve had definitely worked as required was on March 12, 2009 when the loop was placed in service.

The public was never endangered because no actual event occurred. However, the system is counted on for core cooling during certain accident scenarios and the valve failure left it inoperable, which potentially could have led to core damage had an accident involving a series of unlikely events occurred.

A regulatory conference was held on April 4 to discuss the issue. TVA stated that the failed valve was the result of defective manufacturing but still would have opened and supplied the necessary cooling water. The NRC review disagreed and concluded the violation was “red” or of “high safety significance.”

“The valve was repaired prior to returning the unit to service and Browns Ferry continued to operate safely,” said Victor McCree, NRC Region II administrator. “However, significant problems involving key safety systems warrant more extensive NRC inspection and oversight.”

The finding results in increased NRC oversight at Browns Ferry including a supplemental inspection to evaluate safety, organizational and programmatic issues at the plant. The inspection, which has not yet been scheduled, will include extensive reviews of programs and processes not inspected as part of the NRC's baseline inspection program. The facility's safety culture will also be assessed.

The final significance letter issued to TVA with more information on the issue will be available through the Region II office or via the NRC webpage at www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/adams.html. The number to access the letter is ML111290482.

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