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NRC SCHEDULES OPEN HOUSE AND PUBLIC MEETING FOR MARCH 21 TO DISCUSS PALISADES NUCLEAR POWER PLANT PERFORMANCE IN 2011

Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials have scheduled a public meeting for Wednesday, March 21, to discuss with local residents the agency's assessment of safety performance at the Palisades nuclear power plant and the NRC oversight activities.

The plant is located in Covert, Mich., approximately 50 miles west of Kalamazoo, and is operated by Entergy Nuclear Operations.

The open house is informal and will be held from 5:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. EDT. The public meeting will be held 6 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. and consist of a formal exchange between the NRC and Entergy representatives about the plant's 2011 performance followed by the opportunity for members of the public to ask questions and make comments to the NRC staff. The meeting will be held at the Beach Haven Event Center, 10420 M-140, in South Haven.

"The NRC continually reviews the performance of the Palisades plant and the nation's other commercial nuclear power facilities," said NRC Acting Region III Administrator Cynthia Pederson. "This meeting allows us to discuss our annual assessment of safety performance with members of the local community. The goal of this open house is to explain how the NRC works to protect people and the environment and answer questions from residents about nuclear regulation."

A letter sent from the NRC Region III office to plant officials addressed the performance of the plant during 2011 and will serve as the basis for the discussion. It is available on the NRC Web site at: http://www.nrc.gov/NRR/OVERSIGHT/ASSESS/LETTERS/pali_2011q4.pdf.

While overall, the NRC believes the plant operated safely last year, the NRC identified several issues which have prompted the NRC to significantly increase its oversight of the plant.

The NRC uses color-coded inspection findings and performance indicators to assess nuclear plant performance. The colors start with "green" and then increase to "white," "yellow" or "red," commensurate with the safety significance of the issues involved.

The NRC letter states that two “white” findings of low to moderate safety significance and one “yellow” finding of substantial significance to safety were identified during 2011. As a result, the NRC moved the plant into the Degraded Cornerstone Column of the Action Matrix, or the third performance column, during the last quarter of last year from the Licensee Response Column, or the first performance column.

The “yellow” finding is related to an electrical fault caused by personnel at the site which resulted in a reactor trip, the loss of half of the control room indicators, and actuation of safety systems that were not warranted by actual plant conditions. One “white” finding is related to a coupling failure in a service water pump which was a repeat of a previous equipment failure that occurred in 2009 because the plant failed to prevent recurrence of the cracking condition and failed to completely consider the properties of the steel used in a past modification of the couplings. The other “white” issue is associated with an auxiliary feedwater pump trip caused in part by incorrect greasing of a piece of the pump mechanism.

The NRC will perform supplemental inspections to make sure the plant understands the causes of the findings and has taken effective short- and long-term corrective actions to prevent their recurrence.

The letter also notes that the NRC identified three cross-cutting issues in the area of human performance associated with conservative assumptions; documentation and procedures; and oversight. Human performance concerns constitute a “Cross-cutting issue” and affect multiple areas of plant operation. These issues tend to involve behaviors, such as the plant staff’s ability to effectively develop and follow procedures. These behaviors do not constitute violations of NRC requirements. However, they can be major contributing factors to safety-significant findings. The cross-cutting issue will remain open until the number of findings with cross-cutting aspects decreases and the plant demonstrates effective corrective actions that result in sustained improvement in human performance. The NRC expects Entergy to discuss the company’s plans to address human performance issues during this public meeting.

In addition to supplemental inspections to address the findings, Palisades will continue to receive inspections performed by two NRC Resident Inspectors assigned to the plant and by inspection specialists from the Region III Office in Lisle, Ill., and the agency’s headquarters in Rockville, Md. Among the areas of plant operations being inspected are license renewal, dry cask spent fuel storage, emergency preparedness and radiation protection.

The most current performance information for Palisades is available on the NRC website at: http://www.nrc.gov/NRR/OVERSIGHT/ASSESS/PALI/pali_chart.html

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