

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

No. 97-128

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
(Monday, September 8, 1997)

**NRC ISSUES ADDITIONAL LETTERS TO THREE UTILITIES
ON SPENT FUEL STORAGE CASK WELDING PROBLEMS**

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Office of Nuclear Material Safety and Safeguards has issued supplements to Confirmatory Action Letters sent in May to three utilities that use the Sierra Nuclear Corporation-designed VSC-24 dry storage cask for spent nuclear fuel. The new letters confirm that the utilities have pledged not to load any more of the casks until actions are taken to resolve welding problems.

The utilities and plants where the casks are used are Entergy Operations, Inc., operator of Arkansas Nuclear One near Russellville, Arkansas; Consumers Power Co., operator of the Palisades nuclear power plant near South Haven, Michigan; and Wisconsin Electric Power Company, operator of the Point Beach nuclear power plant near Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

NRC issued Confirmatory Action Letters on May 16 confirming commitments made by the three utilities and by Sierra Nuclear, which holds an NRC certificate approving the use of the VSC-24. Sierra Nuclear agreed to determine the root cause of weld problems encountered while joining the inner cask lid to the cask walls in VSC-24 units at the Palisades and Arkansas plants. It also agreed to assess the potential for delayed cracking of the welds and to develop corrective actions to inhibit recurrence. The three utilities agreed to evaluate their welding practices, take corrective actions if needed, and submit a report to the NRC at least 14 days before loading another VSC-24 cask with spent fuel. No additional casks have been loaded since that time.

After issuing the Confirmatory Action Letters, NRC was notified by Sierra Nuclear that March Metalfab Inc., which fabricates some of the VSC-24 casks under a contract with Sierra Nuclear, had performed some welding without documenting that it met requirements.

Sierra Nuclear responded to the May Confirmatory Action Letter on July 30, and the three utilities responded in August. After reviewing the responses, the NRC staff on August 26 requested additional information from Sierra Nuclear. Several NRC questions in this request must be satisfactorily answered before the three utilities can load additional VSC-24 casks.

In addition, the newly issued supplementary letters confirm that the three utilities will:

-- Identify all actions taken to minimize recurrence of the lid welding problems, and make revised welding procedure specifications and records available for NRC inspection.

-- Confirm that all unloaded VSC-24 casks that are intended for use at the plants meet regulatory requirements. Supporting documentation will be made available for review by NRC inspectors.

-- Notify the NRC when these actions have been completed.

The NRC staff will review the utilities' responses, notify the companies of the results of the review, and indicate which casks, if any, may be loaded with spent fuel.

Copies of the Confirmatory Action Letters and the August 26 request for additional information from Sierra Nuclear will be available via the NRC website at <http://www.nrc.gov/OPA/reports/>.

###