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NRC STATUS REPORT ON EFFORTS TO HEAD OFF COMPUTER PROBLEMS IN YEAR 2000

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, in conjunction with the designation by a Presidential Council this week as "National Year 2000 Action Week," recognizes the importance of solving the Year 2000 (Y2K) computer problem and offers the following status report on its comprehensive program for dealing with it.

The NRC supports the President's Council on Year 2000 Conversion, participating in those groups dealing with energy/electric power, health care and emergency management.

There are two aspects of the NRC's Y2K program: one addresses the agency's computer systems; another addresses those licensed by the NRC to use nuclear materials.

An inventory of all NRC automated information systems identified seven mission-critical computer systems subject to Year 2000 problems. Three of these systems have been repaired or replaced, one more will be made Y2K compliant by the end of this month, and the remaining three are on schedule to be fixed by March of next year.

The NRC has been working with its licensees to prepare their facilities for the Y2K problem. Nuclear power plant licensees indicate no significant Year 2000 problems with computer systems required for safe operation or shut down of plants since most are controlled by analog equipment which does not use computers. However, other non-safety computer systems used in such areas as control room displays, radiation monitoring and security functions have potential problems which licensees have informed the NRC they intend to make them Y2K compliant by next July 1.

The NRC has completed three of 12 audits at nuclear plants to evaluate the effectiveness of licensees in identifying and correcting Year 2000 problems. So far, results have not shown the need for further NRC regulatory action.

In response to a request from NRC (Generic Letter 98-03), fuel cycle licensees and certificate holders of gaseous diffusion plants have indicated they all have programs to address Year 2000 problems. The NRC has put out notices and discussed the Y2K problem with other licensees using nuclear materials in industry, medicine, and research to ensure that the problem will be either eliminated or minimized.

The NRC also is developing a contingency plan to react promptly to any unanticipated Y2K problems that might arise at licensed facilities. The plan will be coordinated with other Federal agencies, States, the nuclear industry, and international regulatory organizations.

In addition, the NRC recently spearheaded an initiative at the 128-member International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to develop a resolution making the IAEA a clearinghouse for international information on efforts to identify and correct potential safety-related Y2K problems at nuclear installations. The resolution also calls upon nuclear power countries to promptly adopt contingency plans to deal with unexpected Y2K problems.

The "Year 2000" problem refers to a computer's inability to recognize 21st century dates beginning with January 1, 2000, and beyond. It is caused by computer programs that use two-digit numbers to represent a calendar year (such as "98" for 1998). If the problem is not corrected, vulnerable computer systems will read "00" a 1900, rather than 2000, possibly causing some plant systems or equipment to malfunction.

Additional information on Y2K activities is available on NRC's web site at: http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/NEWS/year2000.html.

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