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I-98-36 April 1, 1998  
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NRC REGION 1 ADMINISTRATOR APPROVES RESTART OF SALEM UNIT 1

Following a multifaceted review by Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff involving numerous inspections and assessments, the agency's Region I Administrator has approved the restart of the Salem nuclear power plant's Unit 1 reactor. Located in Hancocks Bridge, N.J., the unit has been out of service for almost three years. Its twin reactor, Unit 2, was restarted last fall after a lengthy outage.

In a letter sent today to plant operator Public Service Electric & Gas (PSE&G) Company, NRC Region I Administrator Hubert J. Miller said his decision was based on improvements in the condition of the facility's systems and components, upgraded programs and processes, and the large number of corrective actions accomplished, such as creating an environment more conducive to employees raising concerns .

Nevertheless, the administrator pointed out that the agency will keep a close watch on both units, not only during restart but for some time afterwards, through its Salem Assessment Panel of Unit 1 and on-site inspection staff. The panel, consisting of managers and other personnel from the Region I office in King of Prussia, Pa., and NRC headquarters in Rockville, Md., was formed in July 1995 to coordinate the agency's inspection and assessment efforts and to focus on the progress of performance improvements at Salem Units 1 and 2.

"We intend to maintain the [assessment panel] in an active oversight role until sustained improved performance has been demonstrated for both Salem units," Mr. Miller wrote. "[It] will continue to monitor performance and adjust NRC resources applied to Salem activities, as appropriate."

As part of its oversight of Unit 1's restart, the NRC has established "hold points" at the 25, 50 and 90-percent power levels, at which power escalation must pause so that the agency can assess the plant's performance. NRC also plans to assess Unit 1's performance approximately one month after full power operations resume. An NRC team extensively assessed the unit's restart readiness in February.

Salem Unit 1 has been off-line since May 16, 1995, when it was shut down due to inadequate control room ventilation. Unit 2 was shut down on June 7, 1995, because of problems with a valve that rendered the unit's residual heat removal system inoperable. In addition, the utility was also faced with the need to address multiple programmatic shortcomings, to repair degraded equipment and to improve its problem identification and correction processes.

The NRC issued a confirmatory action letter (CAL) on June 9, 1995, summarizing a broad array of changes the company agreed to make to improve the plant, as well as its agreement to keep both units shut down until those commitments were met and NRC concurred in restart.

"The NRC has performed many inspections since June 1995 to evaluate PSE&G's progress in resolving performance issues," Mr. Miller said in his letter. "These activities included augmented resident inspector staff inspections, specialist review of discrete areas by regional and headquarters staff, and multidisciplined team inspections. These efforts included inspection of 45 technical and 24 programmatic restart issues and the independent review of nine Salem restart plans per the NRC's Restart Action Plan.

"NRC review of programmatic issues," he continued, "encompassed process improvements to be applied to the operation of both Salem units, and NRC review of technical items included aspects that were applicable to both units. Items that were exclusive to Salem Unit 1 were reviewed separately. Two major design inspections were completed and numerous meetings with PSE&G and the public were conducted to ensure that all safety issues were identified and adequately addressed prior to restart."

After a review of all of the findings, Mr. Miller has now decided -- as he did with Unit 2 -- that Salem Unit 1 can return to power. Other commitments spelled out in the CAL remain in effect until the plant has been operated successfully for a period of time.

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