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NRC MONITORS ALERT AT WATERFORD NUCLEAR PLANT

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission is monitoring closely activities at the Waterford 3 nuclear power plant operated by Entergy Operations, Inc. near Taft, Louisiana, following the declaration of an "Alert" condition at that plant at 5:33 a.m.

An "Alert" is the second lowest emergency action level in the NRC required emergency response plan for nuclear power plants. An "Alert" indicates that events are in progress that involve the potential for a substantial degradation of the level of safety at the plant. There has been no release of radioactivity from the plant, operators are in complete control of all systems and the plant is safely shut down.

In response to the "Alert" declaration, the NRC has staffed its incident response center in the Region IV offices in Arlington, Texas. NRC engineers and inspectors are monitoring the activities of Entergy operators, both from the incident response center and from the control room at Waterford, where our resident inspector is stationed.

At about 5:00 a.m., Entergy operators were shutting down the plant to repair a small steam leak. With the nuclear reactor shutdown, operators were initiating the plant's shutdown cooling system, which continues to cool the nuclear core when normal components are taken off line. When a valve was opened to start shutdown cooling, primary cooling water unexpectedly flowed from the primary system into a large storage pool. The valve was quickly shut, remaining open for approximately two minutes, however about 3,000 gallons of primary cooling water was lost from the primary system. That water was quickly restored with backup water supply systems.

Currently, the nuclear core is being cooled by natural circulation through one of the plant's steam generators. Natural circulation is a designed capability that takes advantage of the fact that cooler, denser water will fall to the bottom of a system due to gravity. The primary system components are physically arranged such that warm water can rise from the reactor core into the steam generators where it is cooled, and then the cold water can fall naturally to the bottom of the core to be heated again, in a continuous process.

Entergy operators are now working to determine why primary cooling water flowed out of the system. When that problem is corrected, it is expected that normal shutdown cooling will be established and the initially planned repair activities will go forward.

All appropriate officials of the State of Louisiana and local communities surrounding the plant have been notified.

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