

**United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Office of Public Affairs, Region I
475 Allendale Road King of Prussia, PA 19406
Fax: 610/337-5241
Internet: dps@nrc.gov or nas@nrc.gov**

I-98-32

March 23, 1998

Contact: Diane Screnci (610/337-5330) FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Neil A. Sheehan (610/337-5331)

**NRC PROPOSES \$55,000 CIVIL PENALTY AGAINST PSE&G FOR VIOLATION
STEMMING FROM REACTOR OPERATORS' FAILURE TO FOLLOW PROCEDURES**

A failure to follow safety procedures associated with control rod movements during a reactor shutdown test has led the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to propose a \$55,000 fine against the operator of the Hope Creek nuclear power plant. Public Service Electric & Gas (PSE&G) Company operates the plant, which is located on the Delaware River in Hancocks Bridge, N.J.

The NRC also cited, but did not fine, PSE&G for two other violations at the facility regarding adherence to the agency's rule on plant maintenance.

In the case of the first violation, which was identified by the NRC, plant operators conducted the procedure last November 12 to demonstrate the reactor could meet required shutdown safety margins despite problems involving some of its hydraulically operated control rods. (The control rods are made of material that can inhibit fission and thereby regulate the level of power production in the reactor.) The reactor was in a cold shutdown condition at the time, with the reactor vessel head removed.

During the demonstration, which involved the full withdrawal of 20 control rods, several of the rods became stuck. To free them, plant operators used elevated hydraulic pressure, which is a standard procedure. However, the pressure level was not immediately returned to normal after each rod was freed, as required by plant procedures. The elevated pressure created the potential for rod withdrawal at faster-than-normal speeds.

"Although NRC inspectors informed personnel in the control room of the departure from the stuck rod procedure, including three licensed operators, a formerly licensed quality assurance inspector and the reactor engineering supervisor, no action was taken to address the control rod manipulation violation until the inspector discussed the issue with senior plant management," NRC Region 1 Administrator Hubert J. Miller wrote in a letter to PSE&G regarding the enforcement action.

Mr. Miller, who said the event was of "significant regulatory concern," also noted that prior instances at U.S. commercial nuclear plants involving control rod manipulations should have raised awareness about the need for appropriate controls. Indeed, the NRC issued a \$150,000 fine to Hope Creek in October 1996 for, in part, a violation related to control rod withdrawal.

The other two violations pertain to the NRC's maintenance rule, which took effect in July 1996. The Commission determined there was a need for such a rule in order to ensure that plants monitor the effectiveness of their maintenance work so as to minimize the likelihood of failure of safety-significant equipment that could initiate or adversely affect a problem or accident that develops at the facility.

These infractions involve: 1.) a failure to include certain systems, components and functions within the scope of the rule; and 2.) a failure to adequately demonstrate that the performance or condition of a number of systems, components and functions is being effectively controlled through the performance of preventive maintenance.

However, subsequent inspections of this program determined that corrective actions planned by PSE&G were comprehensive and that significant progress had been made in implementing the improvements.

PSE&G has 30 days to pay the fine or request in writing that all or part of the penalty be withdrawn.

#