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**NRC LIFTS RESTRICTIONS ON LOADING OF SPENT FUEL CASKS
AT POINT BEACH NUCLEAR POWER PLANT IN WISCONSIN**

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Office of Nuclear Material Safety and Safeguards has lifted restrictions on the loading of spent nuclear fuel into VSC-24 dry storage casks at the Point Beach nuclear power plant near Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

Sierra Nuclear Corporation is the designer of the VSC-24 cask and holds an NRC certificate of compliance approving its use.

NRC's action lifting restrictions on loading at Point Beach was taken after the agency found that the plant's operator, Wisconsin Electric Power Company, had met all commitments listed in a confirmatory action letter the NRC sent to the company on May 16, 1997, as supplemented on September 5.

The May 16 letter documented Wisconsin Electric's commitment to identify root causes and implement corrective actions to prevent recurrence of welding problems that were associated with the VSC-24. The supplement addressed fabrication problems involving the cask that were identified in June 1997. It also confirmed Wisconsin Electric's agreement not to load additional VSC-24s until actions were taken to correct welding problems and until Sierra Nuclear Corporation responded to certain NRC requests for information.

In addition, the supplement confirmed that the utility would identify actions taken to minimize recurrence of the welding problems and confirm that all unloaded VSC-24 casks intended for use at the plant meet regulatory requirements.

Sierra Nuclear completed its response to NRC in July of this year. On July 22 the NRC informed Sierra Nuclear that it had adequately identified the root causes of the welding problems and developed adequate corrective actions to prevent recurrence. These corrective measures will be subject to NRC review in any future inspections of Sierra Nuclear and all the utilities using the VSC-24.

Wisconsin Electric also agreed to perform ultrasonic testing of casks previously loaded with spent fuel, as did two other utilities that are currently using the VSC-24 casks: Entergy Operations, Inc., at its Arkansas Nuclear One nuclear power plant near

Russellville, Arkansas, and Consumers Power Co., at its Palisades plant near South Haven, Michigan. At Point Beach, the tests are to be completed no later than August 31, 1999. Wisconsin Electric will notify the NRC within 30 days after completion of testing.

Wisconsin Electric submitted its final response to the NRC confirmatory action letter, and supplement, on Tuesday (August 11). After reviewing the response, the NRC staff concluded that the utility had met its commitments and therefore could resume loading VSC-24 casks at the Point Beach facility.

In the August 11 letter, Wisconsin Electric also made new commitments on how it would control future fabrication and use of the VSC-24. The NRC found that the commitments, if properly implemented, would provide reasonable assurance that Wisconsin Electric would continue to use the VSC-24 in accordance with safety requirements.

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