



NRC NEWS

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NRC BEGINS COMPREHENSIVE INSPECTION AT PALO VERDE NUCLEAR GENERATING STATION

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has begun a comprehensive inspection to assess activities at the Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station as part of its heightened oversight as a result of performance problems there. The plant, operated by Arizona Public Service Co., is located 50 miles west of Phoenix.

The 20-member team, which includes reactor inspectors, health physicists, specialists in emergency planning and other technical disciplines, began the first of two weeks onsite today. They will return to the site on Oct. 29 for a third week of in-depth inspection, then write a report which the NRC will make publicly available later this year.

“Palo Verde continues to operate safely,” said NRC Region IV Administrator Elmo E. Collins. “However, the number and significance of previous equipment problems warrants increased NRC inspection. This particular inspection is designed to give us a very close look at the scope and effectiveness of Palo Verde’s performance improvement initiatives.”

The inspection is intended to assess the breadth and depth of performance problems and will include a broad review to determine what processes and programs need improvement. Focus areas will include the quality of technical assessments, the timeliness and thoroughness of corrective actions, communications between technical organizations and engineering quality.

This will also be the first time the NRC performs an independent safety culture assessment at a nuclear plant as part of an inspection. The effort will include NRC interviews with workers and managers onsite, observation of plant activities, and focus groups with members of various technical organizations. “This was recently added to our inspection process to help us better understand whether there are safety culture issues contributing to the root cause of problems, and if so, to ensure they are being properly addressed,” Collins said.

Palo Verde has been under increased NRC oversight since the fourth quarter of 2004 following a finding for a substantial safety issue. Inspectors found that APS had incorrectly left

air pockets in portions of the emergency core cooling system at each reactor that could have hindered the system's operation during certain types of accidents. The finding remains open because APS has not effectively addressed performance problems.

A lack of questioning attitude and technical rigor as well as poor operability determinations by workers contributed to a finding issued by the NRC last February for problems with an emergency diesel generator at Unit 3, moving Palo Verde into a higher level of NRC oversight.

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