

June 25, 2012

The Honorable Ron Wyden
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Wyden:

I am responding to your letter dated April 16, 2012, in which you express your concern for the Japanese people and the long-term safety of the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Power Station. You recently returned from a visit to Japan and conveyed particular concern about the large inventory of spent fuel at the facility, the need to prioritize retrieval and safe storage of that material, and the need to focus on greater international support and assistance.

The Japanese government, in coordination with the facility owner, TEPCO, continues to focus their efforts and significant resources in pursuing actions toward stabilization of the facility and ultimate decommissioning. As you know, through the end of 2011, the Japanese completed initial stabilization efforts required prior to pursuing spent fuel removal and decommissioning. These initial efforts included establishing more stable cooling of spent fuel pools, stabilizing all reactors at the site in a state equivalent to cold shutdown, achieving steady decreases in radiation levels, and establishing greater control over the release of radioactive material at the site.

As you suggest in your letter, spent fuel removal from all pools at the site is a priority of the Japanese authorities. Earlier this year, remediation and decommissioning activities entered Phase 1 of a three-phase plan in which personnel are preparing for removal of the spent fuel. Phase 1 is planned to last approximately two years. Phase 2, spent fuel removal, planned to begin in 2013, targets a period of up to 10 years. While I appreciate your concern about the schedule proposed for the completion of fuel removal, the government of Japan and TEPCO have communicated their commitment to systematic, structured, and well-controlled and coordinated operations at the site in their approach to fuel removal and to final decommissioning. The work will require dedicated planning to effectively address the operational and safety challenges unique to these fuel transfer activities. Additional effort may also be required to evaluate and confirm fuel integrity; to remotely operate, handle, and inspect spent and potentially damaged fuel; and to repair equipment.

Regarding U.S. and international support and assistance, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), along with its domestic federal partners and international counterparts, provided extensive technical support immediately following the March 11, 2011 event. NRC staff worked tirelessly with Japanese technical experts and government representatives, forging strong relationships that continue to this day.

While NRC staff are no longer stationed at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, the NRC continues to provide technical support to the Embassy and its Japanese counterparts. These communications ensure that Embassy staff is aware of the NRC's ongoing or planned activities, as well as allowing them to present specific requests for NRC support.

The NRC and Japan have a long-standing bilateral cooperative relationship coordinated through an annual meeting. These meetings focus on implementation of technical regulatory issues of mutual concern. In November 2011, NRC re-established its bilateral cooperative relationship by; incorporating Fukushima-specific activities into the regular coordination process; created a formal Steering Committee to be led by an NRC senior executive, with Steering Committee meetings to be held at least semi-annually; and re-started the lower level annual bilateral technical meetings.

NRC is continuing to prepare for the first Steering Committee meeting to be held shortly after the establishment of the new Japanese nuclear regulatory agency by identifying technical topics of interest to Japan and the U.S. Some possible topics for these interactions include accident reconstruction/root cause analysis, beyond design basis events, event notification with degraded infrastructure, and hydrogen mitigation. In addition, the NRC has routine exchanges of technical information with Japanese organizations almost daily. When technical topics are raised that need expedited resolution, the NRC provides requested information in a timely manner via teleconferences, and exchanges with the Japanese government affiliates located in Washington, D.C. NRC staff also conducts periodic outreach and briefings for other relevant stakeholders.

The Japanese government is aware of the technical resources and assistance that is available from the NRC, the U.S. Department of Energy, other U.S. federal partners, and the international community, including the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Nuclear Energy Agency. The NRC is committed to providing further assistance if requested. I want to assure you that through our counterparts at the U.S. Department of State, we continue to make technical and logistical support available to the Japanese.

Thank you for your interest in this matter. The NRC shares your interest in the safe and timely remediation and decommissioning of the Fukushima Dai-ichi site in Japan. Please contact me or Ms. Rebecca Schmidt, Director of the Office of Congressional Affairs, at (301) 415-1776, if you have any questions or would like to discuss this further.

Sincerely,

/RA/

Gregory B. Jaczko

cc: The Honorable Steven Chu
The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton