

July 23, 2012

The Honorable Jim Gerlach
United States House of Representatives
Washington D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Gerlach:

On behalf of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), I am responding to a June 18, 2012, email from Scott Savett of your staff. He forwarded a copy of a June 14, 2012, correspondence to you from Dr. Lewis Cuthbert, President of the Alliance for a Clean Environment. Dr. Cuthbert is concerned about risks to public health and safety posed by the Limerick Generating Station. The NRC's regional office in King of Prussia frequently communicates with Dr. Cuthbert and other members of the Alliance for a Clean Environment during public meetings, via phone calls, and through written correspondence in response to their questions and raised concerns.

With respect to the references made to a "radioactive spill into the Schuylkill River" that occurred in March, 2012, NRC inspectors immediately conducted an event follow-up inspection to independently evaluate the licensee's radiological assessment relative to public health and safety. The NRC's documented inspection results for this issue concluded that releases did not, nor were likely to, result in any projected dose to any member of the public exceeding a small fraction of the NRC's permissible dose limits. The source of the discharged water in question is continuously monitored by installed radiation monitors and is sampled and analyzed for radioactivity. Limerick placed this issue in its corrective action program and took a number of prompt actions to address the cause of inadvertent release. The plant delayed additional releases until interim actions were implemented, placed restrictions on the discharged water, and cleaned the Schuylkill River diffuser.

With regards to routine releases, NRC regulations require nuclear power plant licensees to implement strict controls on radioactive releases. The controls are specified within detailed offsite dose control program procedures and include programs such as sampling and analysis of plant effluents, sampling and analysis of drinking water sources, radiological monitoring and radionuclide analysis, calculation of potential public doses, and comprehensive reporting of both dose information as well as release information. These programs are inspected by NRC inspectors to ensure proper implementation. Consequently NRC inspection activities help ensure that public health and safety is maintained for nuclear plant operations.

With respect to the risks posed by a possible earthquake, the Limerick facility was designed and licensed to reflect the seismic hazards on site. Moreover, the NRC has continued to study seismic hazards since it licensed Limerick as part of Generic Issue 199, "Implications of Updated Probabilistic Seismic Hazard Estimates in Central and Eastern United States on Existing Plants." While updates to seismic data and models have indicated that some plants might have stronger ground motion than originally thought, levels still remain within the plants' safety margins, the overall seismic risk remains small, and adequate protection is maintained. The NRC does not rank plants by seismic risk.

We continue to examine seismic safety issues at all U.S. commercial nuclear power plants as part of our follow up to the 2011 earthquake and tsunami affecting the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Power Plant in Japan. Among the actions taken by the agency to implement the recommendations of our Near-Term Task Force created following the events in Japan, was issuing request-for-information letters. These letters, issued March 12, 2012, directed each nuclear power plant operator to reevaluate the seismic (and flooding) hazards at its sites using present-day methods and guidance, and to conduct “walkdowns” (visual reviews of the plant’s seismic structures) to ensure protection against hazards. The NRC expects most licensees will complete the walkdowns by the end of 2012. The NRC expects that the majority of licensees, including those with the units that have greatest potential seismic risks, will be able to complete their seismic reevaluations within a 5-year time frame. Once responses to the letters are received, the staff will assess them and take any additional regulatory actions that may be warranted. During this time, of course, the NRC will continue its normal oversight of Limerick’s operations, which includes full-time inspectors stationed at the plant.

I appreciate the opportunity to offer the NRC’s perspective on the issues raised by Dr. Cuthbert. If you have any questions, please contact me or Ms. Rebecca Schmidt, Director of the Office of Congressional Affairs, as (301) 415-1776.

Sincerely,

/RA by Michael Johnson for/

R. W. Borchardt
Executive Director
for Operations

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