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CONTACT: Diane Screnci, 610-337-5330
Neil Sheehan, 610-337-5331

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E-mail: opa1.resource@nrc.gov

NRC Finalizes ‘White’ Inspection Finding for Susquehanna Nuclear Plant, Resulting in Additional Oversight

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission will increase its level of oversight at the Susquehanna nuclear power plant, in Salem Township (Luzerne County), Pa., as a result of the finalization of a “white” (low to moderate safety significance) inspection finding and related violation in the area of emergency preparedness.

NRC inspectors, during an in-depth review of plant drill scenarios, identified a concern with how plant personnel would determine the start of a 15-minute clock for emergency assessment and declaration for a scenario involving the potential loss of primary containment. (Both of the plant’s units have primary and secondary containments to prevent the release of radioactivity to the environment following an accident.)

The inspectors found that Susquehanna’s interpretation of the 15-minute assessment and classification period degraded plant personnel’s ability to make a timely “Site Area Emergency” declaration in certain cases. (A Site Area Emergency is the third tier of the four levels of emergency classification used by the NRC.)

Specifically, the plant’s owner, Susquehanna Nuclear LLC, interpreted the requirements as having the 15-minute clock begin when operator actions were, or were expected to be, unsuccessful in halting reactor coolant system leakage rather than when indications of a leak’s onset are available to plant operators, signaling that an emergency action level has been exceeded.

“It’s important during an emergency situation that state, county and local officials are provided with information in a timely manner to assess the situation and implement protective actions, if warranted,” NRC Region I Administrator Dan Dorman said. “While the probability of an event of this magnitude is extremely low, this finding points to a weakness in that area that the company will need to address.”

Prior to making a final enforcement decision, the NRC offered the company the opportunity to accept the finding without any formal response or provide additional information in a Regulatory Conference or in writing. The company submitted a written response dated May 15 in which it

acknowledged the finding but stated that training and programs already in place prior to the finding would have ensured the impact of the issue would have been relatively minor.

The NRC considered the information but determined the finding was appropriately characterized as “white.” The finding also involved a violation of NRC requirements regarding maintaining an emergency plan that meets federal standards.

The NRC, in response to the “white” finding, will perform a supplemental inspection at the plant to ensure the company has completed a thorough root-cause evaluation of the issue and put in place effective corrective actions.

Subsequent to the issuance of the preliminary “white” finding, the Susquehanna emergency action level basis was revised to correct the declaration timeliness issue.