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***NRC CONDUCTS FULL-SCALE EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS EXERCISE
IN PREPARATION FOR Y2K***

In preparation for the "Year 2000," the Nuclear Regulatory Commission conducted a full-scale exercise October 15 to test its Y2K contingency plan. Involved in the exercise were the headquarters operations center, NRC's regional incident response centers, three fuel cycle facilities and 11 nuclear power plants.

The exercise was conducted to test the readiness of the NRC to deal with possible events during the transition to the Year 2000. The exercise tested the three major facets of the agency's Y2K contingency plan - (1) the ability of the NRC to respond to Y2K-related events at a nuclear power plant or fuel cycle facility; (2) the ability to respond to licensee requests for enforcement discretion permitting a nuclear power plant that faces a Y2K-related problem to continue operating to support electrical grid stability; when safety is not an issue and (3) NRC's ability to share information with its licensees concerning Y2K problems.

The exercise successfully demonstrated the agency's ability to communicate with its licensees and the public during several simulated Y2K challenges. It also demonstrated the ability to retrieve information on the status of foreign nuclear power plants from the NRC-developed Y2K early warning system.

Twelve other countries participated in providing status reports during the NRC exercise. They were: Austria, Belgium, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Japan, South Korea, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, and Taiwan.

The agency also demonstrated its ability to identify and compensate for potential Y2K-related failures within its headquarters operations center. When a simulated communications failure occurred at headquarters, all operations shifted to the Region IV Office in Arlington, Texas, consistent with the agency's Y2K contingency plan. This included handling simulated emergency notifications from various NRC licensees, event responses, and enforcement discretion requests from licensees.

During the exercise, NRC officials tested communications with NRC inspectors at nuclear plants across the country that were participating in the exercise, including use of satellite-based communications systems, and provided timely and accurate status information to a simulated White House Information Coordination Center (ICC). A mock press conference with journalism students from American University was held at the simulated ICC Joint Public Information Center.

Overall, the exercise served to share information among the various organizations to assure all response efforts were coordinated and communicated effectively to protect public health and safety in the event of a Y2K-initiated event at a nuclear power plant or other licensed nuclear facility. The exercise was successful. However, several valuable lessons were learned which will allow the NRC to improve its preparedness for the Y2K transition. A summary of these lessons will be placed on the NRC website at the address listed below.

The "Year 2000" or "Y2K" problem refers to a computers' potential inability to recognize dates beginning with January 1, 2000, and beyond. It arises from computer programs that use two-digit numbers to represent a calendar year (such as "98" for 1998). For example, computer systems could read "00" as 1900, rather than 2000, potentially causing computer systems to malfunction.

The NRC's Y2K Contingency Plan is currently available at:
<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/NEWS/year2000.html>

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