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NRC STAFF TO PRESENT REVIEW OF UTILITY'S READINESS TO LOAD
ADDITIONAL SPENT FUEL CASKS AT PALISADES NUCLEAR PLANT

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff will meet Tuesday, June 1, with Consumers Energy Company officials to discuss the findings of an inspection of the utility's preparations for loading additional spent fuel storage casks at the Palisades Nuclear Power Plant. The plant is located near Covert, Michigan.

The meeting will start at 2:00 p.m. in the Training Building at the Palisades plant, 27780 Blue Star Memorial Highway, Covert. The meeting is open to public observation. NRC officials will be available after the meeting for questions and comments from members of the public and the news media.

An NRC inspector is at the plant this week to observe Consumers Energy's practice runs of equipment and facilities to be used during actual spent fuel loading into the dry storage casks. NRC inspectors have also reviewed the utility's improvements to the spent fuel loading procedures.

Since August of last year, an NRC inspection team has been inspecting and reviewing the ultrasonic testing of the 13 concrete and steel casks loaded with spent nuclear fuel from the plant. Casks with this fuel are located on a concrete pad on the plant property.

Specialists in the team both observed the utility's ultrasonic examinations and reviewed the test data from all 13 casks.

Last month, the NRC lifted restrictions on the loading of spent nuclear fuel into VSC-24 dry storage casks at the Palisades plant. These restrictions had been in place since September 1997, when the NRC issued a Confirmatory Action Letter to the utility documenting its agreement not to load any more VSC-24 casks until problems associated with the cask closure welds were resolved. On four occasions between 1995 and 1997 utilities using the VSC-24 casks had cracks occur in either the weld for the inner lid or the outer lid. In each case, the welds were

repaired and reexamined. Ultrasonic inspection was developed as a corrective action to confirm that the entire volume of the weld is sound.

The VSC-24, designed by Sierra Nuclear, is a vertical system made up of two casks, one inside the other. The outer container is 18 feet high with an 11 foot diameter and can hold 24 spent fuel assemblies. The outer walls are made of steel-reinforced concrete greater than two feet thick, with an inner steel lining. The inner container, known as the multi-assembly sealed basket, has two separately welded lids which cover the assemblies. The inner lid is five inches of material encased in steel. The outer lid is a thick steel disc welded in place over the inner lid.

Consumers Energy plans to load five additional VSC-24 casks, beginning in June, to permit unloading of all fuel in the reactor core during a refueling outage in October. The 13 casks were loaded between 1993 and 1995.

The team will issue a written report in several weeks.

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