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NRC STAFF PROPOSES \$50,000 FINE AGAINST DETROIT EDISON COMPANY  
FOR A VIOLATION OF NRC REQUIREMENTS AT FERMI PLANT

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has proposed a \$50,000 fine against Detroit Edison Company for failing to adequately lubricate electrical switches at the Fermi Nuclear Power Plant. The facility is near Monroe, Michigan.

Numerous safety-related systems and components (emergency diesel generators, motor operated valves, the ventilation system, and various pumps) receive power through these electrical switches.

In 1995 and 1996, there were several occasions when switches opened unexpectedly. Detroit Edison's investigation found that the switches were not latching properly due to excessive friction in the mechanical components. Plant staff had not performed switch lubrications during an 18-month period while searching for a new switch lubricant following NRC-cited violations in 1994 and 1995 in which an unapproved lubricant caused failures in safety-related circuit breakers.

Earlier this year, several additional instances of switch lubrication problems occurred. NRC inspectors, during inspections at the plant from February to June, noted inadequacies in the utility's corrective actions for the earlier switch problems. The utility had only done a limited lubrication of switches and did not assess whether multiple non-lubricated switches would fail during a seismic event.

(During a seismic event, switches which are not properly latched could unlatch and open. This failure could affect several safety related systems in the plant.)

NRC inspectors also discovered that the plant's preventive maintenance program did not specify a lubrication frequency for the switches or address the vendor's recommendation for twice-a-year visual inspection and operation.

In a letter to the utility, NRC's Regional Administrator, A. Bill Beach said:

"Both industry information and previous NRC violations should have triggered broad corrective actions to identify, correct, and prevent potential [electrical] switch failures.... In addition, extensive NRC involvement was required to ensure that your staff understood the safety significance of this issue and the need to implement effective corrective action."

Subsequently, Detroit Edison extensively cleaned and lubricated all 1120 switches in the plant, conducted training for plant staff, and improved the preventive maintenance program.

The utility has until October 22 to pay the fine or to protest it. If the fine is protested and subsequently imposed by the NRC staff, the licensee may request a hearing.

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