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***NRC AMENDS ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEWS TO RENEW NUCLEAR POWER PLANT
OPERATING LICENSES TO INCLUDE CONSIDERATION
OF CERTAIN TRANSPORTATION IMPACTS***

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission is amending its regulations governing environmental reviews of applications for renewal of nuclear power plant licenses.

The amendment to Part 51 of the NRC's regulations makes two changes:

(1) It eliminates the requirement that individual license renewal applications address one specific type of environmental impact caused by spent nuclear fuel generated by the plant during the term of the renewed license -- the impact of moving that fuel from a specific plant to a permanent high level-waste repository, such as the one proposed at Yucca Mountain, Nevada. The amendment also accounts for the environmental impacts of transporting fuel with higher uranium enrichment and higher "burnup," which provides more power production per metric ton of fuel than has previously been the case.

(2) It adds a requirement that a license renewal application address the impact of transportation on local services in the vicinity of the plant during the license renewal term.

Regarding the first change, new studies (reported in NUREG-1437, Vol. 1, Addendum 1) have given the NRC confidence that the expected environmental impact of transporting spent fuel from all plant sites to a repository, such as Yucca Mountain, can be applied generically -- that is, in a fashion that is equally applicable to each plant within the whole nuclear industry. This conclusion eliminates the need for each licensee to conduct its own specific site evaluation as part of its license renewal application, as long as no new and significant information exists. In its generic analysis, the staff made a number of "conservative" assumptions, which means that the assumptions would lead to an overestimate of the actual environmental impacts of transporting spent fuel to a single location.

These new studies, which also deal with the use of more highly enriched fuel and higher burnup fuel, are described in a final addendum to the generic environmental impact statement for license renewal which is also being issued. Because more nuclear power plants are beginning to use fuel with higher enrichment and higher burnup, it was necessary for NRC to evaluate this change at these higher levels. The NRC believes it likely that many plants seeking license renewal will be following that practice.

The second change is consistent with the findings in NUREG-1437, "Generic Environmental Impact Statement for License Renewal of Nuclear Plants," issued in May 1996,

to address local traffic impacts attributable to continued operation of the plant during the license renewal term. This issue was identified in NUREG-1437 for inclusion in Part 51, but was inadvertently omitted from the 1996 revision to Part 51 which codified the other findings of NUREG-1437.

In analyzing the environmental impact of transporting spent fuel and waste in the vicinity of a single repository, the NRC evaluated the impact in the vicinity of Yucca Mountain and specifically the impacts in the vicinity of Las Vegas, Nevada. The NRC elected to evaluate the impacts in the vicinity of Yucca Mountain because Yucca Mountain is the only location currently being evaluated for a repository under the Nuclear Waste Policy Act. The NRC's analysis of the impacts in the vicinity of Yucca Mountain in this instance does not prejudge the eventual licensing of Yucca Mountain as a repository. Rather, it reflects NRC's existing license renewal process by reflecting current repository activities and policies. If an application is filed by the Department of Energy (DOE), the licensing process for a repository in the vicinity of Yucca Mountain will constitute an entirely separate regulatory action from the proposed final rule. Furthermore if, based on technical or national policy considerations, some site other than Yucca Mountain is selected in the future for study as a repository, the NRC will evaluate the applicability of the generic environmental impact statement for the license renewal process to other proposed repository sites.

Although the public comment period on the proposed rule officially ended on April 27, in response to concerns raised about the length of the 60-day comment period, NRC considered comments received as late as July in preparing the final rule.

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