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NRC ESTABLISHES NEW ADVISORY PANEL ON NUCLEAR MATERIALS LICENSING VULNERABILITIES

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission is establishing a special advisory panel to help identify vulnerabilities in the agency's nuclear materials licensing program.

The new panel, designated as the Independent External Review Panel to Identify Vulnerabilities in the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Material Licensing Program, is being created in response to criticism of the agency's licensing process in three recent reports.

The NRC's Office of the Inspector General earlier this year recommended that the agency "convene an independent panel of experts external to the agency to identify agency vulnerabilities concerning NRC's material licensing and tracking programs and validate the agency's ongoing byproduct material security efforts."

In July, the U.S. Senate's Homeland Security and Government Affairs Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations issued a staff report on "Dirty Bomb Vulnerabilities," which identified an "apparent good-faith presumption that pervades the NRC licensing process," and recommended that NRC staff physically inspect the premises of most materials license applicants before issuing a license.

Also in July, the U.S. Government Accountability Office published a study in which investigators were able to apply for and obtain an NRC materials license for a dummy corporation. The NRC took immediate steps to address this issue and formed a task force to develop an action plan for further improvements in the materials licensing process. That task force recommended chartering the external review panel to identify any remaining weaknesses in the agency's materials licensing process.

The panel will assess the existing and potential security vulnerabilities related to NRC's import, export, specific and general license programs. It is expected to develop an agenda and plan for the review, including an assessment of pre-licensing guidance, licensing procedures, the licensing process, possession limits on licenses, and license reviewer training and oversight. The panel will document each significant issue and propose recommended improvements. Some of its meetings will be public, while others will be closed to discuss security matters.

The panel is to report directly to Executive Director for Operations Luis A. Reyes, and will periodically update the Commission on its work. It is expected to submit its report in early 2008.

The panel, established under the Federal Advisory Committee Act, will include Benjamin Nerud, of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency; Thomas Hill, former director of the Georgia Radiation Control Program; and Michael Ryan, currently chairman of the NRC's Advisory Committee on Nuclear Waste and Materials.

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