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NRC AMENDS URANIUM MILL TAILINGS REGULATIONS  
TO CONFORM TO EPA STANDARDS

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission is amending its regulations governing the disposal of uranium mill tailings to conform them to recent amendments of Environmental Protection Agency's standards. This action is required by the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, as amended, and is to become effective on July 1.

To previously existing requirements, the amendments further require timeliness in completing the cover over mill tailings and verification that the cover over the tailings is effective in controlling the release of radon.

The Environmental Protection Agency also has proposed rescinding similar requirements issued under the Clean Air Act if it finds that the NRC program in this area provides an ample margin of public safety. This would eliminate dual regulation of this group of licensees and provide adequate protection of the public from releases of radon from uranium mill tailings piles.

The NRC now requires, under its Part 40 regulations:

-- that an earthen cover (or approved alternative cover) be placed over uranium mill tailings to control the release of radon-222 gases at the end of milling operations; and

-- that the earthen cover be designed to provide reasonable assurance that releases of radon will not exceed an average of 20 picocuries per square meter per second and that the barrier be effective in controlling radon releases for 1,000 years to the extent reasonably achievable and, in any case, for no less than 200 years.

The amendments will add the following additional requirements:

-- that the emplacement of the earthen cover be carried out in accordance with a written, NRC-approved plan that includes enforceable dates for the completion of key reclamation activities (milestones);

-- that the plan provide for the completion of the final radon barrier as expeditiously as is practicable considering technological feasibility when the pile or impoundment no longer is being used for the disposal of additional tailings;

-- that testing and analysis must be carried out to verify that releases of radon do not exceed an average of 20 picocuries per square meter per second;

-- and that erosion protection features also be completed in a timely manner;

-- for specified non-operational uranium mill tailings impoundments, there would be a goal of completing the final radon barrier by December 31, 1997, and for all other impoundments, seven years after the date when the impoundments are no longer being used for the disposal of additional tailings.

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