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NRC AMENDS RULES FOR TESTING LEAKAGE RATE
OF NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS CONTAINMENTS

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission is amending its regulation dealing with testing the leakage rate of the containments that house the reactors of nuclear power plants.

NRC requires that containments be essentially leak-proof against the release of any significant amount of radioactivity to the environment in the event of an accident. Tests must be conducted before and during plant operation to ensure that containment leakage does not exceed allowable rates.

Currently, the overall containment structure must have three favorable tests every ten years, and such containment penetrations as electrical connections must have one favorable test every two years.

The rule change gives licensed utilities an option of reducing the frequency of these leakage-rate tests based on how well the overall containment and its penetrations have performed in tests since the plant has been operating. Under this new option, the overall structure of the containment would need one, rather than three, favorable leakage tests in a ten-year period. Electrical penetrations also would need one favorable test in a ten-year period.

In order to use this new performance-based test option, licensees must have a program for examining the history of the overall containment system's ability to limit leakage. This program must set out the criteria for certain tests and include a comparison of previous test results.

NRC has adopted the rule change as a result of advances in containment testing, risk assessments performed to date, and an overall effort to eliminate requirements that are marginal to safety.

An NRC Regulatory Guide, 1.163, "Performance-Based Containment Leakage-Test Program," is being published to provide guidance to utilities on leakage-rate test methods, procedures and analyses that may be used to implement the rule change.

The change to NRC's Part 50 rule on leakage-rate test requirements will become effective 30 days after publication in the September 26 edition of the Federal Register.

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