

United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission  
Office of Public Affairs  
Washington, DC 20555  
Phone 301-415-8200 Fax 301-415-2234  
Internet: opa@nrc.gov

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NRC REVISES REQUIREMENTS FOR  
DECOMMISSIONING NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission is amending its regulations for decommissioning nuclear power plants to bring increased efficiency and uniformity to the process. The revisions also clear up ambiguities in NRC's regulations, codify practices that have been used on a case-by-case basis, and increase public participation.

The primary change allows no major decommissioning activities to be undertaken, once a reactor permanently ceases operation, until after certain information has been provided to the NRC and the public. After that, if NRC has no objections, decommissioning may begin.

A proposed rule published for comment last July resulted in these final requirements:

A licensee must certify to the NRC that the reactor has ceased operations permanently and that the nuclear fuel has been permanently removed from the reactor vessel. The licensee also must submit a post-shutdown decommissioning activities report within two years after expressing intent to cease operations.

This report must describe the licensee's planned decommissioning activities, detailed schedule, and cost estimate, as well as a statement as to whether environmental impacts of decommissioning have been covered in previous environmental impact statements or reports. If not, a license amendment is required to address environmental concerns.

A 90-day hold is required on the post-shutdown decommissioning report to allow NRC review, together with public discussion of the licensee's plans, at a meeting to be held near the plant. Afterwards, if NRC has no objections, the licensee may begin major decommissioning activities. These may include permanent removal of the reactor vessel, steam generators, and large pumps, valves, and piping systems, without specific NRC approval.

The revised regulations require that before completing decommissioning, the licensee must submit an application to the NRC to terminate the license. The application must be accompanied by a plan that describes any radioactivity on the site; remaining dismantlement activities; site cleanup plans and final radiation survey; updated cost analysis; planned end-use of the site; and any new environmental information.

NRC will publish the license termination plan for public comment, hold a public meeting near the plant to discuss the licensee's plans, and provide an opportunity for a public hearing.

Revisions to the regulations also allow licensees to use up to 23 percent of their decommissioning trust funds for legitimate decommissioning activities provided that there are sufficient funds to maintain the reactor in a safe storage condition and that such use does not inhibit the licensees's ability to fund ultimate release of the site and termination of the license. The new rule further specifies that an expired license cannot be terminated until the NRC notifies the licensee in writing.

Some of the changes in the final regulations also apply to university research reactors and other non-power reactors.

Details of the final regulations are contained in a notice in the July 29 edition of the Federal Register.

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