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COMMISSION PUBLISHES FINAL RULE FOR EXPANDED UTILITY ROLE IN TESTING REACTOR OPERATOR LICENSE CANDIDATES

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has amended its regulations to provide an expanded role for its nuclear power plant licensees in certifying reactor operators.

The Commission took this action in recognition of improvements in industry training programs, to make the operator licensing program more efficient, and as a cost-cutting measure for the agency.

Applicants for a license to manipulate the controls of a nuclear power plant must pass a written test and demonstrate knowledge of control room operation fundamentals to be considered for the final, hands-on, site-specific license examination.

Under its new rule, licensees operating nuclear power plants will be permitted to prepare, proctor, and grade their exams and prepare their operating tests -- subject to NRC approval. The NRC will continue to administer and grade the hands-on portion of the test, including a control room simulator examination and a one-on-one demonstration of specific operating tasks.

The rule change follows a 1995 decision by the Commission to begin a pilot program in which nuclear power plant licensees would prepare the tests under NRC oversight.

All examinations and tests written by utilities and tailored to their specific plants will be subject to review, modification, and approval by NRC staff before the tests are given. If the submitted test fails to meet NRC's standards, the agency has the option of preparing its own exam in lieu of accepting or modifying one prepared by a utility.

To ensure that the NRC staff retains proficiency in examination writing and to serve as a quality check on the process, the NRC staff will prepare the licensing examinations upon request by facility licensees and at least once annually in each of the agency's four regions.

Licensing of operators for research and test reactors will continue to be handled by the NRC and will be unaffected by the rule change. Utilities also will continue to prepare and administer requalification examinations to licensed operators as part of an NRC-approved training program.

Full details of the final rule are included in a notice to be published shortly in the Federal Register.

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