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NRC REVISES POSITION ON USE OF POTASSIUM IODIDE
IN CASE OF ACCIDENT AT NUCLEAR POWER PLANT

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has decided to modify its position regarding the use of potassium iodide as a protective measure for the general public in case of a severe nuclear reactor accident. The agency has decided to endorse the Federal Radiological Preparedness Coordinating Committee's (FRPCC) recommended policy to federally fund the purchase of potassium iodide for states at their request, and the NRC will provide the funding.

The Commission noted that the federal government recently began stockpiling potassium iodide near major metropolitan areas for use in mitigating the consequences of potential terrorist use of nuclear, biological or chemical weapons. The potassium iodide would be available to any state for any type of radiological emergency at any time.

If a state wishes to have its source of potassium iodide close at hand for use in a possible nuclear reactor accident, the federal government would fund the purchase, under the Commission's revised position.

Potassium iodide, if taken in time, blocks the thyroid gland's uptake of radioactive iodine and thus could help reduce thyroid diseases that might otherwise be caused by exposure to airborne radioactive iodine that could be dispersed in a nuclear accident.

Under the NRC's revised position, the federal government would purchase potassium iodide, but interested state and local governments would be responsible for maintenance, distribution and subsequent costs. NRC licensees would, as part of their emergency response planning, discuss this matter with state and local governments who make decisions on protective measures as part of their planning for responses to potential emergencies.

If finalized by the FRPCC, the proposed new policy will be published in the Federal Register. NRC will work with the Federal Emergency Management Agency to prepare the final policy

statement and to develop implementation details, including criteria for evaluating a state's request for funding for potassium iodide.

The current federal policy was published in the Federal Register in 1985. It recommends that potassium iodide be stockpiled and distributed to emergency workers and institutionalized persons during radiological emergencies, but does not recommend requiring pre-distribution or stockpiling for the general public.

The best technical information indicates that prompt evacuation and in-place sheltering are the preferred protective actions for the general public. However, the state (or in some cases, the local government) bears ultimately responsibility for the protection of its citizens. Therefore, the decision for local stockpiling and use of potassium iodide as a protective measure for the general public is left to the discretion of the state or local government.

Currently two states (Tennessee and Alabama) include in their emergency planning the use of potassium iodide as a protective measure for the general public.

In 1995 the White House issued Presidential Decision Directive 39 on "U.S. Policy on Counterterrorism." It directed federal agencies to take a number of measures to reduce vulnerability to the potential use by terrorists of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons.

A report was prepared by a group chaired by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, with representatives from the NRC and other federal agencies. The report recommended that the federal government purchase and stockpile chemical nerve gas antidotes, vaccines for anthrax, antibiotics, potassium iodide and other medicines for use by the general public in the event of a terrorist attack. Currently there are three national stockpiles of medical supplies that include potassium iodide. Additionally, there will be 26 Metropolitan Medical Strike Teams, each with a full set of medical supplies, including potassium iodide. Two of the teams have been established, and the remaining 24 are in the process of being established. Thus the size and number of locations of federal stockpiles of potassium iodide are expected to increase. Potassium iodide from these resources could be used as a protective measure for the general public in the event of a severe nuclear accident.

This report was presented to the President and approved for distribution in May. Thus potassium iodide is already available nationally as part of emergency response preparedness for terrorism involving nuclear, biological and chemical agents.

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