



NRC NEWS

U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

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NRC ANNOUNCES ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, PUBLIC MEETINGS ON PROPOSED MIXED OXIDE FUEL FACILITY

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has announced plans to prepare an environmental impact statement to support its license review of a proposed mixed oxide (MOX) fuel fabrication facility on the Department of Energy's Savannah River site near Aiken, South Carolina. The agency is also scheduling public meetings to allow interested members of the community to express their opinion and provide information and comments to assist the agency in its environmental evaluation.

Scoping meetings will be held April 17-18 in North Augusta, South Carolina, and in Savannah, Georgia.

These meetings will enable the public to become involved in determining the scope, or bounds of the environmental impact statement for the proposed MOX facility. Additional meetings inviting public comment will be held after the draft statement is published.

The Department of Energy plans to construct a MOX fuel plant through a contract with the consortium of Duke Engineering & Services, COGEMA Inc., and Stone & Webster (known as DCS). If NRC grants the license, DCS could build and operate a MOX facility that would convert surplus weapons-grade plutonium, supplied by the Department of Energy, into fuel for use in commercial nuclear reactors. Such use would render the plutonium essentially inaccessible and unattractive for weapons use. Commercial nuclear power plants in the United States currently use uranium as fuel; the mixed oxide fuel would be a combination of uranium and plutonium.

DCS submitted an application on March 1 for authorization to construct the facility. An opportunity for a hearing will be announced in a Federal Register notice following NRC's acceptance review of the application. The NRC's preparation of an environmental impact statement is a major part of the construction application review.

The MOX fuel fabrication facility would have to be built in accordance with strict safety requirements set forth in the agency's regulations. If the NRC review proceeds on schedule, and if the agency approves construction, DCS intends to begin construction in mid-2002. DCS also intends to submit an application for an operating license in June 2002.

The public meetings in April will assist the NRC staff in determining the range of environmental impacts and alternative actions to be considered in the environmental impact statement, and will identify significant issues. The principal goals of the process are to:

- Ensure that problems are identified early and are studied properly;
- Identify alternatives to building the facility that will be examined;
- Identify significant issues that need to be analyzed;
- Eliminate unimportant issues; and
- Identify public concerns.

Some areas to be covered in the environmental impact statement include: health and safety, waste management, transportation, handling of hazardous materials, background radiation, water and earth resources, air quality, land use, noise, ecological resources, socioeconomic issues, and natural disasters.

The meetings will follow a non-traditional format, with attendees participating in smaller working groups within the larger meeting setting. Participants may express their views verbally and will also be encouraged to submit their comments in writing.

The meeting on April 17 in North Augusta will be held at the North Augusta Community Center, at 496 Brookside Avenue. The meeting on April 18 in Savannah will be held at the Georgia Coastal Center, at 305 Martin Luther King Blvd.

The meetings are scheduled from 7:00 p.m. until 10:00 p.m. NRC staff will be available at 5:30 p.m. to informally discuss the project. Those interested in attending are asked to register in advance by calling Betty Garrett, 301-415-5808 (e-mail: bsg@nrc.gov).

Other initiatives and background information on the MOX project are located at <http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/NMSS/MOX/index.html> on the web.

The NRC expects to publish its draft environmental impact statement next February and will schedule meetings shortly thereafter to obtain public comment.

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