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Subject: Decommissioning comments

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Chief, Rules and Directives Branch
Division of Administrative Services
Mailstop T 6 D 59
US Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Washington, DC 20555-0001

To Whom It May Concern:

Please accept the following comments in regard to Draft Supplement 1 to NUREG-0586, "Draft Supplement Dealing With Decommissioning of Nuclear Power Reactors," and place them into the public record.

Public Citizen is very concerned about several aspects of this supplement to NUREG-0586, specifically those that could pose risks to public health, the public's right to participate in decisions that affect them, and environmental quality. Additionally, Public Citizen is concerned that the provisions outlined in the Supplement might allow owners and operators of nuclear power reactors to reduce or completely evade their civic, environmental, economic and legal responsibilities.

Having stated that, we would like to make it abundantly clear that we see decommissioning to be the most appropriate and responsible action to take with all nuclear reactors. Nonetheless, any and all decommissioning activities should be performed methodically and with great caution, ensuring that the public is appropriately involved in the processes and thoroughly protected from dangers every step of the way. Certainly, every reactor shut-down is another step away from further creation of radioactive waste, the ever-present possibility of nuclear terror (be it a reactor accident or terrorist attack) and the continuing irradiation of our everyday lives. Every shut-down reactor can take us a step closer to a sustainable energy future but, unfortunately, reactor shut-down is not the threshold of safety, where the public can be assured that no health or environmental dangers will originate from the site. There still remains a mountain of radioactive waste after shut-down, including the reactor itself and, typically, an incredibly dangerous stockpile of irradiated reactor fuel. Whereas the reactor itself and the equipment and materials of the central facilities are often treated as the object of decontamination, it must be noted that the previous operation of the plant has dispersed radiation and contamination that did not regard the facility's fence line as a barrier. Any serious approach to decommissioning a site must take this into account.

Decommissioning should not be a final opportunity for the nuclear industry to "take the money and run" - be it to make a profit from inadequate cleanup and monitoring, or to limit losses from costs that had been underestimated for decommissioning throughout the operating lifetime of the nuclear reactor. There should be no allowance for the industry to

hurriedly raze structures, sweep the radioactive mess under a porous and permeable carpet (or disperse the remains and cleanup materials in many unregulated forms far from the reactor site), cut corners and add risks and contamination to an already precarious clean-up operation. The public must be protected.

Our specific concerns are as follows:

Relegation of More Decommissioning Processes to Generic Status

In establishing 80% (24 of 30) of the environmental impacts of decommissioning as being "generic" the NRC is doing the industry's bidding to restrict or eliminate the affected public's opportunities to comment on, guide, monitor and review the decommissioning of nuclear power reactors in their communities. Regardless of any uniformity that may or may not exist as issues to consider at decommissioning reactors - and our position is that any concerns of the relevant communities are site-specific - the NRC's move to make most considerations within the decommissioning process "generic" is a thinly veiled project to eliminate public review and full disclosure through public hearings. Further, this move runs counter to NRC's "Openness" Principle of Good Regulation, wherein "Nuclear regulation is the public's business, and it must be transacted publicly and candidly. The public must be informed about and have the opportunity to participate in the regulatory processes..." and to NRC's Organizational Value of "Service to the public, and others who are affected by our work." (both found at <http://www.nrc.gov/who-we-are/values.html>)

Arbitrary and Capricious Determination of "Levels of Significance" for Decommissioning Environmental Impacts

NRC's "Levels of Significance and Accountability of Environmental Impacts" assign values of risk to affected communities as "small," "moderate" and "large" as determinants for the denial or approval of a public site-specific review and, potentially, a public adjudication for environmental mitigation. Public Citizen maintains that these categories are excessively arbitrary and broad, and largely groundless for the following reasons:

1. The biological effects of ionizing radiation are destructive. No safe "threshold level" for exposure to ionizing radiation exists for the general population (including the fetus).
2. There is a long history of unresolved regulatory conflict over radiation protection standards that are utilized to determine NRC risk assessments. Federal regulators, including the NRC and the Environmental Protection Agency, have not reached a consensus on residual radiation criteria for decommissioning, with EPA standards being significantly lower (more protective) than NRC criteria. To our knowledge, this conflict has not been resolved and, therefore, it appears that the NRC has unilaterally and arbitrarily concluded what standards would apply in determining whether a risk is "small," "moderate" or "large."

3. The NRC risk assessment inappropriately ignores the population of children in its "critical group" evaluation as the population most vulnerable to residual radioactivity exposure from decommissioning operations. This runs counter to NRC's Organizational Value to a "Commitment ... to protecting the public health and safety."
4. The NRC has a documented history of significant lapses in effective oversight of decommissioning operations as reported by the General Accounting Office in a May 1989 report, "NRC's Decommissioning Procedures and Criteria Need to be Strengthened" (GAO/RCED-89-119). The GAO not only found that complete information does not exist for all licensed activities or buried wastes, but that NRC was found to have terminated a license with radioactive contamination in excess of its own guidelines. Further, the report noted that NRC regulations lacked a time requirement for document retention. NRC's questionable past performance does not support the agency's move toward generic treatment of decommissioning nuclear facilities where affected communities are denied public review and full disclosure of contamination, the decommissioning plan and license termination plan.

Rubblization

NRC's proposal to allow "rubblization" (defined as: "the demolition of onsite concrete structures. Rubblizing these structures could result in material ranging from gravels to large concrete blocks, or a mixture of both.") of concrete structures at the reactor site to take place without opportunity for public intervention until after the action is completed is outrageous. Rubblization poses some specific risks to the surrounding communities and the site workers, as the rubblized material could contaminate via air, soil, and water pathways. Thus, Public Citizen insists that it is only appropriate that the affected communities surrounding the reactor site be given opportunities to review rubblizing plans and procedures, and that this issue be addressed on a site-specific basis.

Partial Site Release before License Termination

The Supplement indicates that portions of a nuclear reactor site could be released from regulatory control prior to the site operator's license termination. This would relieve the nuclear utility of responsibility and liability for portions of sites (be they materials or real property) while still being licensed for the control of the entire site. Public Citizen is completely opposed to any such practice, which would allow radiation/radioactively-contaminated materials and wastes to be released, reused, or recycled, without restriction, into the unregulated industrial, commercial, and public environment.

Externalizing Costs to Ratepayers/Taxpayers

Public Citizen is opposed to any policy that would shift the financial burden of decommissioning to ratepayers. The cost of properly decommissioning (including thorough decontamination) a reactor site can vary widely, depending on the size of the facility, the amount of time in which it was operational, and the degree of contamination.

As the NRC itself stated in the Supplement, the lack of adequate decommissioning funds can potentially result in delays and/or unsafe and improper decommissioning. Further, with utility deregulation and the attendant shuffling of corporate ownership, much uncertainty has developed regarding the ability of the owning and operating utilities to pay for proper decommissioning of their facilities. Public Citizen insists that site-specific reviews are necessary so that the public has an opportunity to ensure that the utility will be able to pay for the entire, thorough decommissioning process.

Relevance of "Out-of-Scope" Activities

There are several issues in the Supplement which are briefly addressed and dismissed as "out-of-scope" which we insist need to be dealt with as site-specific issues for any thorough EIS on decommissioning, with full public rights to hearings, review, oversight, and disclosure maintained. These include:

1. Spent fuel storage and maintenance - The public at each reactor site community should determine how irradiated/"spent" fuel is stored/dispositioned. If a centralized high-level waste repository is opened at some future date to accommodate the irradiated fuel and high-level waste from a community's decommissioned reactor, the communities that exist along the possible transportation paths should also be involved in site-specific environmental impact reviews/assessments. To exclude spent fuel storage, maintenance, transport, and disposal away from the reactor location from the scope of this GEIS/Supplement, and the opportunity for site-specific EIS reviews, is arbitrary and capricious.
2. Low-level waste disposal at a LLW site - The concept of rubblizing and capping a reactor site and allowing it to function as a low-level waste disposal facility without having the appropriate permitting and licensing hearing process is a serious departure from past NRC licensing practices, and any such "rubblizing" proposal should not be approved without a site-specific EIS review. To exclude this or any similar proposal from a site-specific EIS review, and the scope of this GEIS/Supplement, is arbitrary and capricious.

Please enter these comments into the public record.

Sincerely,

David Ritter
Policy Analyst
Public Citizen/Critical Mass Energy and Environment Program