

October 13, 1958

Honorable John A. McCone
Chairman, U. S. Atomic Energy Commission
Washington 25, D. C.

Subject: POPULATION DENSITY

Dear Mr. McCone:

The issue raised by Commissioner John Graham on October 10, 1958, regarding reactor hazards and population density is a difficult one to express clearly. Moreover there are policy implications which require much more study and discussion.

There is the same concern for the safety of each and every person living in the vicinity of a reactor. In the case of an accident to a reactor which results in the release of radioactivity, if the surroundings are sparsely populated there is less chance of people being injured than if they were densely populated. If the population were sparse enough, in the worst case (a narrow cloud) it may be that no one would be injured; whereas, in a densely populated area some one would almost certainly be. It is clearly desirable to expose as few people as possible to any given risk.

Experience has shown that it is much easier to alert and move a few people than many out of harm's way.

One cannot predict with accuracy the future rate of growth of any community but there are great differences in various locations for the immediate future. In the context of keeping the risk to as few people as possible one should be more cautious in a location which is presently indicating a rapid growth.

Those involved in the consideration of reactor hazards have become accustomed to consider the more gloomy possibilities (perhaps too much so) because of the very great consequences of a major accident. Experience with reactor operation should certainly permit a better understanding of the actual possibilities and probabilities. More important, the future should bring improvement in reactor safety.

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