

History of the Local Public Document Room Program

In 1971, the Atomic Energy Commission implemented a program to establish Local Public Document Rooms (LPDRs) within a 50-mile radius of proposed nuclear power facilities, upon receipt of a license application. This program provided local area residents with access to documents considered by the staff during the licensing, construction, and operation of commercial nuclear power plants and later expanded to include other types of NRC-licensed facilities. Starting in the early 1980's, the NRC provided microfiche in lieu of paper copy to all participants in the LPDR program. This included microfiche cabinets, a microfiche reader, and access to the Nuclear Documents System (NUDOCS), the predecessor database to the NRC Agencywide Documents Access and Management System (ADAMS). Microfiche, which was introduced to the Agency in the late 1970s, was at the time the state of the art technology for distributing and archiving information.

Microfiche is no longer the preferred method for document searching since newer systems, such as ADAMS and other electronic databases, have been developed. Microfiche is cumbersome, unfamiliar to many people, and lacks ease of accessibility. It does not allow for easy full text searching that is available in online databases. Additionally, many people today are not familiar with the older microfiche technology and do not know how to use it effectively. In 1999, the Commission decided to discontinue the LPDR Program, due to the implementation of the ADAMS, which allows the public to gain access to unclassified, nonsensitive NRC documents through the Internet.

Today, although the NRC's former LPDR collections are available in a finite number of locations, many of the host libraries that house these collections either do not know where the collections are located or do not know how to effectively use them as was demonstrated in the OIG investigation (Finding #1). There is a significant difference in accessibility between the Sensitive Unclassified Non-Safeguards Information (SUNSI) that was in ADAMS and the limited SUNSI material that is in the LPDRs. Following September 11, 2001, the NRC focused on removing SUNSI material from ADAMS because it was easily retrievable through the internet from virtually any computer around the world. In contrast, to access documents through the microfiche collections, one must go to the geographical location of the collection and with the finding tool from the Public Legacy Library (PLL), obtain a specific citation to determine the document's location, then physically retrieve it from the collection using microfiche reader equipment. Therefore, sensitive information in the microfiche collections is not as readily accessible as it was within ADAMS.

After September 11, 2001, the NRC changed the categorization of some publicly available information from nonsensitive to SUNSI and now withholds that information from the public when it is within the control of the NRC. A limited amount of sensitive information regarding commercial nuclear facilities still exists in a variety of public and private collections that the NRC does not control.

Following September 11, 2001, the NRC also immediately advised nuclear facilities licensees to review their information collections to decide if information now determined to be sensitive was publicly available. The NRC conducted a similar review of its web site and public record-keeping systems. Some information that was previously publicly available was removed.

Subsequently, the NRC issued guidance to staff and licensees on how to recognize sensitive information. It is important to note the collections in the former LPDRs were outside of NRC's control during the document reviews conducted by the NRC in 2001 and 2004. More importantly, documents in the former LPDRs have been freely available to the public to view and replicate for decades. During the 1990's, the NRC Public Document Room's document reproduction contractor routinely copied 2.0 to 2.5 million pages of NRC documents per year for the public.

Currently, the NRC screens its documents prior to making them publicly available to ensure that sensitive information is appropriately withheld. The NRC continues to work diligently to balance its commitment of openness with the public with the need to prevent releases of sensitive information. The NRC staff acknowledges that a limited quantity of documents is currently in former LPDR collections that meet the revised withholding criteria for SUNSI information. However, the NRC believes that the amount of such information is small, its utility is minimal, and it is not easily accessible. Therefore, the NRC had decided not to attempt to retrieve or restrict access to the previously released information and instead focused efforts on more recent public information in its easily retrievable electronic records collections. This judgement was based on the evidence that the NRC had at the time. The staff's current review of this matter indicates nothing has changed to alter this judgement.