NRC NEWS

U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

Office of Public Affairs Telephone: 301/415-8200
Washington, D.C. 20555-0001
E-mail: opa.resource@nrc.gov
Site: http://www.nrc.gov

No. S-09-018 July 13, 2009

"Recent Developments at the NRC"

Prepared Remarks for

The Honorable Gregory B. Jaczko
Chairman
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission

The National Academies
Nuclear and Radiation Studies Board
Washington, D.C.

July 8, 2009

It is good to be here with you today and I would like to thank Dr. Meserve for the invitation. The National Academies have a crucial role to play in promoting sound science for use by government policy makers. In particular, the Nuclear and Radiation Studies Board fosters important dialogue on the use of nuclear technology. Given the role you play in many of the issues that come before the agency, I thought I would share with you some of the recent developments at the NRC on a range of issues.

Over the past few years, one of the issues under discussion has been the management and disposal of low-level waste. As I am sure you are aware, the closure of the Barnwell facility to out-of-compact waste has resulted in a lack of disposal for most Class B and C wastes. Market forces may ultimately solve this national problem, but in the interim the NRC must stay on top of any potential effects that a lack of disposal options could have on our area of responsibility. And those impacts are broad – from impacts on operating reactors to impacts in the areas of decommissioning and clean-up of sites.

This will present challenging and interesting issues for the Commission. Blending, for example, is an issue that the Commission has dealt with before and will likely have to deal with again. Also, earlier this year, the Commission directed the staff to do a limited rulemaking to

address the issue of disposal of depleted uranium, and in the longer term, risk-inform the overall waste classification system in our regulations.

Of course, there are also issues related to high-level waste. With the ongoing litigation surrounding Yucca Mountain, there are some aspects of high-level waste that I will not be able to discuss, but one in particular that the Commission is currently considering, is Waste Confidence.

The Commission has before it a draft final rule to amend the Waste Confidence rule, which is our regulatory approach for addressing the issue of spent fuel storage. Essentially, in this draft final rule the staff recommends that the Commission conclude that spent fuel can be safely stored for 50 or 60 years after the licensed life of operation of any reactor. My colleagues and I have this proposal under active consideration and I look forward to working toward a decision on a final rule later this month.

Additionally, the Commission is and will continue to work on issues in radiation protection and nuclear materials. For example, in 2007, the International Commission on Radiation Protection updated Publication 103. Although NRC's current framework provides adequate protection of public health and safety, workers, and the environment, late last year, the staff recommended to the Commission that the agency move toward greater alignment with Publication 103. The Commission agreed with the recommendations and directed the staff to begin the steps towards alignment by conducting near-term extensive stakeholder outreach for possible future revision of NRC regulations such as 10 CFR 20. Because some of the supporting technical information, such as dose conversion factors, will not be available from ICRP for several more years, the staff will not provide specific recommendations on proposed rule changes until then.

Source security is also an important issue for the NRC. The agency leads a source security task force composed of many other organizations such as DHS, DOE, and EPA. The task force is actually meeting today and I had the opportunity to speak to them this morning. The task force issued a report in 2006 that contained valuable recommendations, many of which we have made good progress on, and will issue another report next year. That report will be a useful tool to see how far we've come, and what still needs to be done.

A major source security initiative the Commission has undertaken is, of course, the National Source Tracking System. This is an unprecedented effort for a government agency. It is both a secure and yet widely accessible computer system that was developed by the NRC. Since January of this year, all transactions involving Category 1 or 2 sources, such as manufacture, transfer, and disassembly, have been reported to the NSTS. This greater accountability for these high-risk sources helps strengthen our national security framework. As is to be expected with any new and complicated system with many users, there have been some difficulties along the way with day-to-day implementation, but those have been or will soon be resolved. The NSTS is an impressive system and we look forward to continuing to improve it even more.

I also wanted to address one last area – that of applications for new reactors. These applications command a significant level of our resources, as well as significant public interest.

We have a number of new reactor applications before the agency and we are proceeding to process them pursuant to our regulations.

As you can see, there are a variety of issues currently occupying our attention, and I can only mention some highlights in a brief presentation. Let me again thank you for your contributions to sound science and nuclear safety. I would be happy to take some questions.