



UNITED STATES
NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20555

August 13, 1990

Mr. Edward Higgins
Editorial Page Editor
The Post-Dispatch
900 N. Tucker Blvd.
St. Louis, Missouri 63101

Dear Mr. Higgins:

I want to clarify the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's policy on exempting slightly radioactive materials that are below regulatory concern, which you addressed in your July 5 editorial. The NRC's goal is to protect the public health and safety and the environment and I am confident our recent policy accomplishes our goal. When the NRC implements this policy, we will ensure that any levels of radiation from exempted activities will be comparable to the low levels that most of us encounter in routine activities such as the use of smoke detectors in our homes today.

Let me give you a frame of reference with respect to radiation. We each get about 350 millirem per year of radiation dose from outer space, air, food, drink, soils, building materials, and medical exams. In fact, our policy is basically consistent with the recommendations of the National Council on Radiation Protection and Measurements and the latest scientific assessments on the risk of radiation by scientists in national and international groups, including the National Academy of Sciences and the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation.

For example, a recent National Academy of Sciences report noted no increase in health effects has been documented in populations residing in areas of high natural background radiation. I want to emphasize that most of the radiation levels used by the eminent scientists who wrote this study as a basis for risk estimates are a thousand times higher, that is 10 rem (not 10 millirem), than the levels in the NRC's policy statement. The estimates of health effects cited in your editorial as being associated with the BRC policy are simply not reasonable.

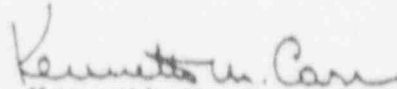
The current disposal of high level and low-level radioactive wastes are incorrectly described in your editorial. Commercial high-level wastes are the very radioactive used fuel from nuclear power plants. For the most part, this fuel is now stored at the nuclear power plant sites awaiting the establishment of a Federal repository by the Department of Energy. The NRC has no intention of exempting high-level radioactive waste or most low level waste. Based on studies prepared by the nuclear utilities and the Environmental Protection Agency, only about 0.01 % or less of the radioactivity in low level waste would be eligible for exemption under our policy.

Mr. Edward Higgins

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Safety is our responsibility, and it is a matter that we at the NRC take most seriously. NRC has been exempting very low levels of radioactive materials on a case-by-case basis for many years. The NRC's goal is to protect the public health and safety and we are confident that regulatory decisions based on current and sound scientific information will do just that.

Sincerely,


Kenneth M. Carr

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Don't Deregulate Nuclear Waste

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has announced plans to permit so-called low-level nuclear waste to be disposed of in municipal dumps, ordinary landfills and incinerators. Fortunately, the regulation won't go into effect for at least a year because of the lengthy required review process. It's a good thing, too, because there's much to be said against the new regulations.

The commission is attempting to make a distinction between high-level and low-level radioactive waste. Presently, both categories of waste are shipped to one of the nation's three nuclear waste disposal areas. Under the commission's proposed rules, items such as gloves and clothing, as well as filters and resins contaminated by use at a nuclear facility, would no longer be regulated. Items that expose a member of the public to no more than 10 millirems of radiation per article would be permit-

ted in the ordinary waste disposal system.

But once such low-level nuclear waste is deregulated, there would be no way of knowing exactly what — or how much in the aggregate — the nuclear industry is sending to the average landfill. Moreover, while the commission believes that increasing the possibility of death by radiation by a mere one in 100,000 constitutes an acceptable risk, that change amounts to an additional 2,500 deaths according to its own studies.

The Environmental Protection Agency thinks this is unacceptable, and promises rules that would at least partly override what the Nuclear Regulatory Commission intends. The National Council on Radiation Protection and Measurements, a group of scientists that closely monitors radiation, also opposes the new policy. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission should think again.