

NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

7590-01

DISPOSAL OR ONSITE STORAGE OF THORIUM
OR URANIUM WASTES FROM PAST OPERATIONS

AGENCY: Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC)
ACTION: Discussion of Options for NRC Approval of Applications for
Disposal or Onsite Storage of Thorium or Uranium Wastes -
Interim Use and Public Comment

SUMMARY: This notice discusses five options for NRC approval of disposal or onsite storage of thorium or uranium wastes from past nuclear operations. The options are contained in a Branch Technical Position for administration by the Uranium Fuel Licensing Branch, Division of Fuel Cycle and Material Safety, Office of Nuclear Material Safety and Safeguards.

DATES: Comments on the options for disposal or onsite storage of thorium or uranium are encouraged. Such comments will be considered in any subsequent revision of the Branch Technical Position. Comments are due

Note: Comments received after the expiration date will be considered if it is practical to do so, but assurance of consideration cannot be given except as to comments filed on or before that date.

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SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

I. Introduction

Some of the sites formerly used for processing thorium and uranium are known today to be contaminated with residual radioactive materials. Some are currently covered by NRC licenses. Others were once licensed, but the licenses to possess and use material have expired. In many cases, the total amount of contaminated soil is large, but the activity concentrations of radioactive materials are believed sufficiently low to justify their disposal on privately owned lands or storage onsite rather than their transport to a licensed radioactive materials disposal (commercial) site. In many instances packaging and transporting these wastes to a licensed disposal site would be too costly and not justified from the standpoints of risk to the public health or cost-benefit. Furthermore, because of the total volume of these wastes, limited commercial waste disposal capacity, and restrictions placed on receipt of long-lived wastes at commercial sites, it is not presently feasible to dispose of these wastes at commercial low-level waste disposal sites.

Effective January 26, 1981, NRC regulations in 10 CFR 20, "Standards for Protection Against Radiation", were amended (45 FR 71761-71762) to delete Section 20.304 which provided general authority for disposal of radioactive materials by burial in soil. Under the amended regulations, licensees

must apply for and obtain specific NRC approval to dispose of radioactive materials in this manner under the provisions of 10 CFR 20.302. A case-by-case review was believed needed to assure that burial of radioactive wastes would not present an unreasonable health hazard at some future date.

The deleted provisions of Section 20.304 previously permitted burial of up to 100 millicuries of thorium or natural uranium at any one time, with a yearly limitation of 12 burials for each type of material at each site. The only disposal standards specified were (1) burial at a minimum depth of four feet, and (2) successive burials separated by at least six feet. Thus a total of 1.2 curies of these materials were permitted to be disposed of each year by burial in a 12 foot by 18 foot or larger plot of ground.

Under the amended regulations, it is incumbent on an applicant who wants to bury radioactive wastes to demonstrate that local land burial is preferable to other disposal alternatives. The evaluation of the application takes into account the following information:

- Types and quantities of material to be buried
- Packaging of waste

- Burial location
- Characteristics of burial site
- Depth of burial
- Access restrictions to disposal site
- Radiation safety procedures during disposal operations
- Recordkeeping
- Local burial restrictions, if any

For applications involving disposal of soils contaminated with low level concentrations of thorium and uranium (other than concentrations not exceeding EPA cleanup standards), the matters of principal importance are:

- Concentrations of thorium and uranium (either in secular equilibrium with their daughters or without daughters present)
- Volume of contaminated soil
- Costs for offsite and onsite disposal
- Availability of offsite burial space
- Disposal site characteristics
- Depth of burial and accessibility of buried wastes
- State and local government views

II. Branch Technical Position

There are five acceptable options for disposal or onsite storage of thorium and uranium contaminated wastes. Applications for disposal or storage will be approved if the guidelines discussed under any option are met. Applications for other methods of

disposal may be submitted and these will be evaluated on their own merits.

1. Disposal of acceptably low concentrations (which meet EPA cleanup standards) of natural thorium with daughters in secular equilibrium, depleted or enriched uranium, and uranium ores with daughters in secular equilibrium with no restriction on burial method.

Under this option, the concentrations of natural thorium and depleted or enriched uranium wastes are set sufficiently low that no member of the public is expected to receive a radiation dose commitment from the disposed materials in excess of 1 millirad per year to the lung or 3 millirads per year to the bone from inhalation and ingestion, under any foreseeable use of the material or property. These radiation dose guidelines were recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for protection against transuranium elements present in the environment as a result of unplanned contamination (42 FR 60956-60959). In addition, the concentrations are sufficiently low so that no individual may receive an external dose in excess of 10 microrentgens per hour above background. This is compatible with guidelines EPA proposed as cleanup standards for inactive uranium processing sites (46 FR 2556-2563).

For natural uranium ores having daughters in equilibrium, the concentration limit is equal to that set by the EPA (46 FR 2556-2563) for radium-226 (i.e., 5 pCi/gm, including background) and its decay products.

The concentrations specified below are believed appropriate to apply. It is expected, however, that currently licensed operations will be conducted in such a manner as to minimize the possibility of soil contamination and when such occurs the contamination will be reduced to levels as low as reasonably achievable.

<u>Kind of Material</u>	<u>Concentration (pCi/gm)</u>
Natural thorium (Th-232 plus Th-228) if all daughters are present and in equilibrium	10
Depleted Uranium	35
Enriched Uranium	30
Natural Uranium Ores (U-238 plus U-234) if all daughters are present and in equilibrium	10

The analysis upon which the Branch Technical Position is based is available for inspection at the Commission's Public Document Room at 1717 H St., N.W., Washington, D.C.

The concentrations specified under this option may be compared with naturally occurring thorium and uranium ore concentrations of 1.3 pCi/gm in igneous rock and uranium concentrations of 120 pCi/gm in Florida phosphate rock and 50-80 pCi/gm in Tennessee bituminous shale.

Concentration limits for natural thorium and natural uranium ore wastes containing daughters not at secular equilibrium can be calculated on a case-by-case basis using the applicable isotopic activities data.

2. Disposal of certain low concentrations of natural thorium with daughters in secular equilibrium and depleted or enriched uranium with no daughters present when buried under prescribed conditions with no subsequent land use restrictions and no continuing NRC licensing of the material.

Under this option the concentrations of natural thorium and uranium are set sufficiently low so that no member of the public will receive a radiation dose exceeding those discussed under option 1 when the wastes are buried in an approved manner absent intrusion into the burial grounds. This option will require establishing prescribed conditions for disposal in the license, such as depth and distribution of material, to minimize the likelihood of intrusion. Burial will be permitted only if it can be demonstrated that the buried materials will be stabilized in place and not be transported away from the site.

Acceptability of the site for disposal will depend on topographical, geological, hydrological and meteorological characteristics of the site. At a minimum, burial depth will be at least four feet below the surface. In the event that there is an intrusion into the burial ground, no member of the public will likely receive a dose in excess of 170 millirems to a critical organ. An average dose not exceeding 170 millirems to the whole body for all members of a general population is recommended by international and national radiation expert bodies to limit population doses. With respect to limiting doses to individual body organs, the concentrations are sufficiently low that no individual will receive a dose in excess of 170 millirems to any organ from exposure to natural thorium, depleted uranium or enriched uranium.

The average activity concentration of radioactive material that may be buried under this option in the case of natural thorium (Th-232 plus Th-228) is 50 pCi/gm, if all daughters are present and in equilibrium; for enriched uranium it is 100 pCi/gm if the uranium is soluble and 250 pCi/gm if insoluble; for depleted uranium it is 100 pCi/gm if the uranium is soluble and 300 pCi/gm if insoluble. Natural uranium ores containing radium 226 and its daughters are not included under this option, because of possible radon 222 emanations and resultant higher than acceptable exposure of individuals in private residences if houses were built over buried materials.

3. Disposal of low concentrations of natural uranium ores, with all daughters in equilibrium, when buried under prescribed conditions in areas zoned for industrial use and the recorded title documents are amended to state that the specified land contains buried radioactive materials and are conditioned in a manner acceptable under state law to impose a covenant running with the land that the specified land may not be used for residential building. (There is no continuing NRC licensing of the material.)

Disposal will be approved if the burial criteria outlined in option 2 (including burial at a minimum of 4 feet) are met. Depending upon local soil characteristics, burials at depths greater than 4 feet may be required. In order to assure protection against radon 222 releases (daughter in decay chain of uranium 238 and uranium 234), it is necessary that the recorded title documents be amended to state in the permanent land records that no residential building should be permitted over specified areas of land where natural uranium ore residues (U-238 plus U-234) in concentrations exceeding 10 pCi/gm has been buried. Industrial building is acceptable so long as the concentration of buried material does not exceed 40 pCi/gm of uranium (i.e., Ra-226 shall not exceed 20 pCi/gm).

4. Disposal of land-use-limited concentrations of natural thorium or natural uranium with daughters in secular equilibrium and depleted or enriched uranium without daughters present when

buried under prescribed conditions in areas zoned for industrial use and the recorded title documents are amended to state that the land contains buried radioactive material and are conditioned in a manner acceptable under state law to impose a covenant running with land that the land (1) may not be excavated below stated depths in specified areas of land unless cleared by appropriate health authorities, (2) may not be used for residential or industrial structures over specified areas where radioactive materials in concentrations higher than specified in options 2 and 3 are buried, and (3) may not be used for agricultural purposes in the specified areas. (There is no continuing NRC licensing of the disposal site.)

Under this option, conditions of burial will be such that no member of the public will receive radiation doses in excess of those discussed under option 1 absent intrusion into the burial ground. Criteria for disposal under these conditions is predicated upon the assumption that intentional intrusion is less likely to occur if a warning is given in land documents of record not to excavate below burial depths in specified areas of land without clearance by health authorities; not to construct residential or industrial building on the site; and not to use specified areas of land for agricultural purposes. Because of this, we believe it appropriate to apply a maximum critical organ exposure limit of 500 millirems per year to thorium

and uranium buried under this restriction instead of 170 millirems as used in options 2 and 3. In addition, any exposure to such materials is likely to be more transient than assumed (essentially continual exposure) under those options. These two factors combine to increase the activity concentration limits calculated under option 2 by about 10. Thus, the average concentration that may be buried under this option for thorium (Th-232 plus Th-228) is 500 pCi/gm if all daughters are present and in equilibrium; for enriched uranium it is 1000 pCi/gm if the uranium is soluble and 2500 pCi/gm if insoluble; and for depleted uranium it is 1000 pCi/gm if the uranium is soluble and 3000 pCi/gm if insoluble.

With respect to natural uranium with daughters present and in equilibrium, the concentration that may be buried under this option is 200 pCi/gm of U-238 plus U-234, i.e., 100 pCi/gm Ra-226. This concentration is based on a limited exposure of 2.4 hours per day to limit the radon dose to less than 0.5 working level month (WLM) which is equivalent to continuous exposure to 0.02 working level (WL). Depending upon local soil characteristics, burials at depths greater than 4 feet may be required.

SUMMARY OF MAXIMUM CONCENTRATIONS PERMITTED UNDER DISPOSAL OPTIONS

<u>Kind of Material</u>	<u>Disposal Options</u>			
	<u>1^a</u>	<u>2^b</u>	<u>3^c</u>	<u>4^d</u>
Natural Thorium (Th-232 + Th-228) with daughters present and in equilibrium	10	50	-	500
Natural Uranium (U-238 + U-234) with daughters present and in equilibrium	10	-	40	200
Depleted Uranium				
o Soluble	35	100	-	1000
o Insoluble	35	300	-	3000
Enriched Uranium				
o Soluble	30	100	-	1000
o Insoluble	30	250	-	2500

a Based on EPA cleanup standards.

b Concentrations based on limiting individual doses to 170 mrem/yr.

c Concentration based on limiting equivalent exposure to 0.02 working level or less.

d Concentrations based on limiting individual doses to 500 mrem/yr and, in case of natural uranium, limiting exposure to 0.02 working level or less.

5. Storage of licensed concentrations of thorium and uranium onsite pending the availability of an appropriate disposal site.

When concentrations exceed those specified in option 4, long term disposal other than at a license disposal site will not normally be a viable option under the provisions of 10 CFR 20.302. In such cases, the thorium and uranium may be permitted to be stored onsite under an NRC license until a suitable method of disposal is found. License conditions will require that radiation doses not exceed those specified in 10 CFR Part 20 and be maintained as low as reasonably achievable.

Before approving an application to dispose of thorium or uranium under options 2, 3, or 4, NRC will solicit the view of appropriate State health officials within the State in which the disposal would be made.

Dated at Silver Spring, Maryland this *19th* day of *October*, 1981.

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and Material Safety
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