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THE NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

Fact Sheet

USNRC
OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20555

NRC Mission—To Protect Public Health and Safety

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission regulates the civilian uses of nuclear materials in the United States to protect the public health and safety, the environment and the common defense and security. This mission is accomplished through: licensing of nuclear facilities and the possession, use and disposal of nuclear materials; the development and implementation of requirements governing licensed activities; and inspection and enforcement activities to assure compliance with these requirements.

The NRC was created as an independent agency by the Energy Reorganization Act, signed into law October 11, 1974, which abolished the Atomic Energy Commission. The NRC, which took over the regulatory functions of the AEC, formally came into being on January 19, 1975. The Energy Research and Development Administration, also created by the Energy Reorganization Act, took over the other functions of the AEC and is now part of the Department of Energy.

When he signed the legislation, President Gerald Ford said, in part: "The highly technical nature of our nuclear facilities and the special potential hazards which are involved in the use of nuclear fuels fully warrants the creation of an independent and technically competent regulatory agency to assure adequate protection of public health and safety. NRC will be responsible for the licensing and regulation of the nuclear industry under the provisions of the Atomic Energy Act. This means that NRC will be fully empowered to see to it that reactors using nuclear materials will be properly and safely designed, constructed and operated to guarantee against hazards to the public from leakage or accident. NRC will also exercise strengthened authority to assure that the public is fully safeguarded from hazards arising from the storage, handling and transportation of nuclear materials being used in power reactors, hospitals, research laboratories or for any other purpose."

Investigators, Advisory Committees and Licensing Boards Serve the Commission

Two separate offices are responsible for investigations of possible wrongdoing.

Office of Investigations—This office is responsible for the conduct of investigations of licensees, applications, contractors or vendors. This responsibility includes investigating all allegations of wrongdoing by individuals or organizations other than NRC employees and NRC contractors. In addition, the office keeps abreast of inquiries and inspections and advises on the need for formal investigations. It also keeps other components of the agency informed of matters under investigation as they affect safety matters.

Office of the Inspector General—The Inspector General is a statutory post mandated by the Inspector General Amendments Act of 1988. It is responsible for conducting independent reviews and appraisals of internal programs and for the conduct of investigations of alleged wrongdoing by NRC employees and contractors.

Three independent groups serve the Commission. They are:

Advisory Committee on Reactor Safeguards—This statutory body of scientists and engineers reviews and makes recommendations to the Commission on all applications to build or operate nuclear power reactors and on related nuclear safety matters.

Advisory Committee on Nuclear Waste—This independent advisory committee provides the Commission with advice and recommendations concerning all aspects of nuclear waste management for which the NRC has responsibility.

Atomic Safety and Licensing Board Panel—Three-member licensing boards are drawn from this panel. They are made up of lawyers and others with expertise in various technical and environmental fields to conduct public hearings on applications to build and operate nuclear power plants and other matters related to the possession and use of nuclear facilities and materials.

Operating Data, Enforcement, Special Projects

Office for Analysis and Evaluation of Operational Data—This office analyzes and evaluates operational safety data associated with NRC-licensed activities to identify issues that require NRC or industry action. It also identifies agency requirements for operational data and related technical information and provides the NRC focal point for coordination of generic operational safety data and systems with the industry and other agencies. In addition, AEOD manages and conducts the support functions for the NRC's Committee to Review Generic Requirements. Its other responsibilities include the development and management of the reactor performance indicators program and the management and direction of programs for diagnostic evaluations and investigations of significant operational events, and the conduct of technical training for the NRC staff through the Technical Training Center in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

This office also is responsible for developing policy and maintaining capability for and initiating the NRC's response to incidents and accidents involving NRC-licensed facilities and materials. When necessary, the NRC Operations Center is activated and an emergency response team from a regional office is dispatched to the scene. The NRC's role is to (1) monitor and evaluate the situation; and (2) provide advice and information to the licensee, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), other Federal agencies, State and local governments and the public.

Office of Enforcement—This office develops policies and programs for enforcement of NRC requirements. It manages major enforcement actions and assesses the effectiveness and uniformity of enforcement actions taken by the regional offices. Enforcement powers include notices of violation, fines, and orders for license modification, suspension or revocation.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission is headed by five Commissioners appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate for five-year terms. The Chairman of the Commission is Ivan Selin. The other Commissioners are Kenneth C. Rogers, James R. Curtiss, Forrest J. Remick and E. Gail de Planque.

Three Basic Functions Performed by Agency

The NRC has about 3300 employees and a budget of about $500 million to carry out the three basic functions listed below. In addition, the NRC is responsible for licensing the export and import of nuclear facilities, equipment and materials.

Licensing—The agency reviews and issues licenses for the construction and operation of nuclear power plants and other nuclear facilities and it licenses the possession and use of nuclear materials for medical, industrial, educational, research, and other purposes. Regulatory authority for nuclear materials licensing has been transferred to 29 states under the NRC's Agreement States Program.

Inspection and Enforcement—The NRC conducts various kinds of inspections and investigations designed to assure that licensed activities are conducted in compliance with the agency's regulations and other requirements, and enforces compliance as necessary.

Regulatory Research and Standards Development—The NRC is mandated by law to conduct an extensive confirmatory research program in the areas of safety, safeguards and environmental assessment. In addition, the agency establishes regulations, standards and guidelines governing the various licensed uses of nuclear facilities and materials.

The Commission has offices in Rockville and Bethesda, Maryland. Its five regional offices are located in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania; Atlanta, Georgia; Glen Ellyn, Illinois; Arlington, Texas; and Walnut Creek, California.

Beginning in late 1981, the role of the NRC's regional offices was expanded in order to bring more of the agency's staff closer to the licensees and public most affected by the agency's regulatory responsibilities. In addition to their inspection and enforcement responsibilities, the regional offices have responsibilities for reactor operator and materials licensing, review and approval of reactor operating license amendments and for the issuance of certain orders and fines.

Three Operating Offices Conduct Major Regulatory Activities

The first major reorganization of the NRC since it was established in 1975 was implemented in April 1987. The reorganization reflected changes which had taken place over the previous 12 years—progressively less involvement with the construction of large, complex nuclear facilities and a greatly increased involvement with the operation and maintenance of these facilities. Preparations also are being made to consider applications to renew existing nuclear power plant operating licenses and review applications to certify advanced nuclear power reactor designs.

Three operating offices direct the conduct of the NRC's major regulatory functions:

Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation—The primary responsibilities of this office are to conduct the inspection and licensing activities associated with operating power reactors that are necessary to protect the public health and safety and to establish a sound regulatory framework for the future. The Office also is responsible for evaluating applications to build and operate new power reactors, for inspection and licensing activities related to the construction and operation of research and test reactors and for licensing reactor operators. In addition, the office is responsible for conducting inspections of NRC-licensed activities under its jurisdiction to assure that they comply with all NRC regulations and requirements. Important elements of this program, as it applies to the construction and operation of nuclear power plants, include resident inspection and systematic assessment of licensee performance (SALP).

Office of Nuclear Material Safety and Safeguards—This office is responsible for licensing fuel cycle facilities such as uranium mills and fuel fabrication plants; for licensing the possession and academic, medical and commercial uses of radioactive materials; for regulating the packaging of radioactive materials for transport; for developing agency-wide policies governing the safeguarding of nuclear facilities and materials at fixed sites and nuclear materials in transport from radiological sabotage, theft or diversion; and for reviewing the application of physical security and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards to the use of U.S.-origin nuclear material in foreign countries. The office also is responsible for directing the implementation of the agency's responsibilities under the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982, as amended, which governs the disposal of high-level radioactive wastes; the Low-Level Radioactive Waste Policy Act of 1980 and the Low-Level Radioactive Waste Policy Amendments Act of 1985 which govern the disposal of low-level radioactive wastes; and the Uranium Mill Tailings Radiation Control Act of 1978, as amended. In addition, the office is responsible for inspection policy and for conducting inspections of materials licensees to assure compliance with all NRC requirements and regulations and for assuring the implementation of the U.S.-IAEA Safeguards Agreement at licensed facilities.

Office of Nuclear Regulatory Research—This office has three primary responsibilities: (1) to plan, recommend and implement programs of nuclear regulatory research, standards development and resolution of safety issues of nuclear power plant and other facilities regulated by the NRC; (2) to develop and promulgate all technical regulations; (3) and to coordinate research activities within and outside the agency including appointment of staff to committees and conferences. The office also coordinates NRC staff participation in standards-related activities of the International Atomic Energy Agency and serves as a principal point of contact for the Commission with the American National Standards Institute and technical and professional societies on matters concerning nuclear standards.