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Systematic Assessment for how the NRC Addresses Environmental Justice in its Programs, Policies, and Activities

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Systematic Assessment for How the NRC Addresses Environmental Justice in Its Programs, Policies, and Activities

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Submitter Information

Organization: Generation Atomic

General Comment

See attached file(s)

Attachments

Gen A NRC Statement



October 28, 2021
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Washington, DC 20555

Subject:

This memo contains recommendations from Generation Atomic for how the Nuclear Regulatory Commission should address environmental justice. These recommendations come at the request of the NRC as part of the systematic review of how the agency addresses environmental justice (ADAMS Accession No. ML21113A070).

Background:

As part of the NRC's request for comments regarding "how NRC programs, policies, and activities address environmental justice" (EJ), Generation Atomic would like to extend its recommendations for how the NRC should approach environmental justice moving forward. These recommendations should be considered with the following considerations in mind:

Recent scholarship in the discipline of environmental justice has emphasized the importance of being proactive in addition to being reactive. The following recommendations reflect this view of environmental justice and the important role that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission plays in these efforts.

We support several of the recommendations made to the NRC from both Good Energy Collective and the Breakthrough Institute, including:

- The NRC should provide plain language summaries of important documents made easily accessible to the public. These documents should include specifics of projects and environmental impact statements.
- Expand stakeholder opportunities for engagement, and create easier and more equitable access to hearings. This includes upgrading web conference software and more advanced notice for public hearings.
- Increased outreach to EJ communities in the effort to bridge the gap between communities, developers, and government. This includes community representatives from the NRC to inform the public about NRC projects, procedures, and opportunities



for involvement.

However, we respectfully do not support:

- The establishment of an environmental justice advisory committee. It is our belief that the NRC can most effectively benefit environmental justice efforts by better streamlining the project licensing process, and the implementation of such a committee may add another hoop to this process.

Lastly, the recommendations outlined below all operate under the umbrella position that nuclear energy can displace the negative effects of fossil fuel use, such as climate change, elevated respiratory impacts, and occupational hazards. Because the most affordable housing is often located close to industrial brownfields, such as fossil fuel plants, these hazards will fall largely on vulnerable, predominantly minority communities, further exacerbating the issues of environmental justice. Nuclear power plays a critical role in addressing these harms and the NRC is authorized to consider them under its mission to regulate the Nation's civilian nuclear fleet to protect public health and the environment.

Recommendations:

1. The NRC should remove unnecessary barriers to the nuclear plant licensing process. Following the above logic that nuclear energy is beneficial for environmental justice, procedural roadblocks to the development of nuclear power plants perpetuate the negative effects of fossil fuels and climate change on these vulnerable communities.

According to Appendix D in the 2020-2021 NRC Information Digest, over 70 nuclear plant projects were canceled in the last 50 years. While the cancelation of these projects are due to a myriad of procedural and bureaucratic reasons, each canceled nuclear energy project is lives lost to the fossil fuel industry.

Specifically, the NRC should amend its current environmental impact assessment process so that it is based on a standard set of safety criteria, rather than design specific guidelines. Additionally, as part of the determination on whether a new nuclear build should move forward, the NRC should weigh the public health and



climate benefits of the nuclear plant against the power source that would otherwise be built if that nuclear plant was not constructed.

2. To ensure that policymakers and the public have a solid basis from which to make decisions, the NRC must provide equitable access to the specifics of nuclear energy. Misinformation is a substantial barrier to the continued expansion of nuclear energy, and thus it is our recommendation that the NRC address this deficit of good information through:
 - 2.1. Accessible, well-sourced information available on the NRC website that addresses the most common misunderstood aspects of nuclear energy (waste, accidents, radiological risk). This should be easily accessed from the homepage of the NRC website, be visual in nature, and easily understood by a lay audience.
 - 2.2. Acknowledgment and correction of misinformation expressed in public hearings. The NRC should begin each hearing with a statement that expresses the NRC's position against the use of misinformation in public testimonies. The NRC should not be afraid to correct the record when something that is obviously false is expressed, either in favor or in opposition to nuclear energy. The NRC should also monitor virtual meeting chats and politely correct misinformation stated there.
3. We recommend that the NRC amend its "Standards for Protection Against Radiation" to eliminate the Linear No-Threshold model for guidance on radiation protection. The Linear No-Threshold (LNT) model used by the NRC posits that any level of radiation is harmful, and that there is no safety threshold for radiation. However, this model does not reflect the academic literature¹ demonstrating that relatively low doses of radiation (<100mSv) are not harmful. By not updating radiation regulations to reflect current research, the implications of LNT further exacerbate public fear about nuclear radiation, contributing to panicked evacuations that are orders of magnitude more dangerous than the radiation itself (e.g. Fukushima Daiichi). We recommend that the

¹ Siegel, Jeffrey A., and Welsh, James S, 2015. Luckey, T. D. 2008. Doss, Mohan 2013.



NRC adopt a more evidence-based model for assessing radiation risk, and publicize this change with easily understood documentation about the science underpinning the decision.

Conclusion:

We would like to thank the NRC for its efforts in addressing issues of environmental justice and its inclusion of the public in this process. Generation Atomic would like to reiterate our position that the biggest impact the NRC can make towards addressing environmental injustice is by streamlining its licensing process and removing unnecessary barriers to the implementation of new nuclear energy projects. In our view additional advisory panels are not needed to do this, but instead it can be accomplished by right-sizing the regulatory burden of radiation to its actual risk, based on rigorous analysis of the current evidence of the subject, rather than ALARA's "better safe than sorry." With decades of hindsight, we can see now that, due to increased air pollution and climate risk, this past approach has been anything but safe.

If the NRC has any questions regarding this comment, please contact Eric Meyer (eric@generationatomic.org).

Kindly,

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