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Regulatory Improvements for Production and Utilization Facilities Transitioning to Decommissioning

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General Comment

From day one of the nuclear power industry-and-government collaboration, many concerned citizens have continually expressed concern that no matter how smoothly nuclear reactors might operate, once they are closed, the public would be left threatened by a legacy of hazardous radioactive waste and contamination. With the Proposed Decommissioning Rule our concerns are coming true. NRC's weakened decommissioning regulations amount to abandonment of its charge to protect public health the environment. The proposed draft of the rules must be replaced by stiffer safety regulations and provisions that guarantee State and Local the power exercise and enforce protective measures even beyond what the NRC requires.

Public Input: The Proposed Rule refuses to provide for post-operational licensing decisions or public hearings, eliminating any accountability by NRC or reactor licensees for the adequacy of safety and environmental protection measures for post-operational activities such as reactor decommissioning, emergency planning, and security. This lack of accountability would persist for decades to come as over 90 operating U.S. reactors cease to operate. Lacking public engagement, the Proposed Rule is inadequate to successfully guide the NRC to protect public health and safety with a strong measure of public accountability for the serious risks to which it exposes the public and the human environment.

Atomic Energy Act compliance: The proposed rule violates the Atomic Energy Act and the decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit in Citizens Awareness Network v. NRC, 59 F.3d 284 (1st Cir. 1995) ("CAN v. NRC") by failing to provide for NRC licensing approval and public hearing opportunities for post-operational decisions on decommissioning, emergency planning, and security. The NRC should require reactor licensees to formulate dismantlement and decommissioning plans and submit them to NRC for licensing approval, with an opportunity for state and local governments and interested members of the public to request a hearing on the adequacy of the plans to satisfy NRC safety and environmental requirements. More importantly, these measures are required by the Atomic Energy Act, under CAN v. NRC.

Safety: I have grave concerns about the provisions for emergency planning and response, which are delegated to FEMA and local governments in the proposed changes. After fuel has been in the spent fuel pool for 10 months,

“the rule would eliminate the requirements for dedicated radiological offsite emergency planning, emergency planning zones (EPZs), and public alert and notification systems.” This raises serious issues for public safety. Neither FEMA nor local responders are prepared to handle radiological emergencies, and the responsibility for this rightly belongs to the industry. Likewise, the Emergency Response Data System should continue to be required until all spent fuel is removed from the reactor site.

Environment: The proposed changes undermine environmental protections. They drop the requirement for an environmental impact review until after the process is completed and weaken the environmental information in the Post-Shut Down Decommissioning Activities Report. A site-specific NEPA review of the process should occur early in the decommissioning process and should provide opportunities for local stakeholders to be informed and involved by offering the interested public an opportunity for a hearing, with appropriate protections for the fairness of the hearing process.

Time limits: The period of time in which a site is required to be cleaned up should be reduced from 60 years to as soon as possible, with due consideration for worker and public health and safety and environmental justice. The NRC must not abdicate its responsibility to review and approve irradiated fuel management programs. This proposed change sacrifices public and environmental safety in favor of the interests of the nuclear industry. Rather, regular NRC inspections, oversight, and reporting on decommissioning activities should be required.

Accountability: The proposed changes weaken the financial responsibility of the industry, which should be required to have secure funding for the full process when a nuclear power plant stops producing energy, and these funds must not be allowed to be used for other purposes.

The NRC must ensure public safety and environmental protection, exercise oversight and hold the industry accountable throughout the decommissioning process. The current proposed rules weakens that imperative and puts the financial priorities of the decommission agents ahead of public safety and environmental protection. The rules constitute abrogation of responsibility and must be revised and the NRC must at the very least restore the regulatory framework of the 1988 Decommissioning Rule.