



POLICY ISSUE **(Notation Vote)**

May 21, 2025

SECY-25-0042

FOR: The Commissioners

FROM: Mirela Gavrilas PhD
Executive Director for Operations

SUBJECT: RECOMMENDATION TO INCREASE RESIDENT INSPECTOR TOUR
LENGTH

PURPOSE:

To address continued difficulty maintaining resident inspector (RI) program positions fully staffed, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) staff requests Commission direction on the tour length limitation for RIs. The current limitation for RI tours is 7 years. The staff recommends increasing this limit to 10 years.

SUMMARY:

The ongoing challenge of keeping the RI program fully staffed is due, in part, to program limitations that require relocation of RIs to address objectivity concerns. An analysis comparing the risks related to the loss of inspector objectivity against maintaining full staffing indicates that extending the RI tour length limit to 10 years poses minimal risk to objectivity, while providing substantial benefits for sustaining program staffing levels.

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BACKGROUND:

RI tour length is a Commission established policy that the staff implements through NRC inspection manual chapters.¹ When the NRC formally implemented the RI program in 1978, RI tour length was established at 3 years to guard against the possibility of an RI losing professional objectivity. In 1981, this policy was modified to allow tour extensions to 5 years upon the approval of the responsible Regional Administrator. The NRC implemented this change based on a reduced potential for loss of objectivity resulting from the assignment of additional RIs to sites, as well as the increasing interest rates in the housing sector.

In 1997, the Commission directed that RI tour length be extended to 7-years from 5-years.² Following additional discussions on RI staffing difficulties, the 7-year tour limit was revisited in 2009 with the Commission reaffirming the 7-year tour length policy.³

DISCUSSION:

The staff is revisiting the 7-year tour limit for RIs based on recent staffing challenges. Since 2018, the NRC has had trouble maintaining full staffing within the RI program. The RI site staffing metric, established in 2005, shows a decline since 2018 culminating in a yellow metric (<95% staffing) for 2022, 2023, and 2024.

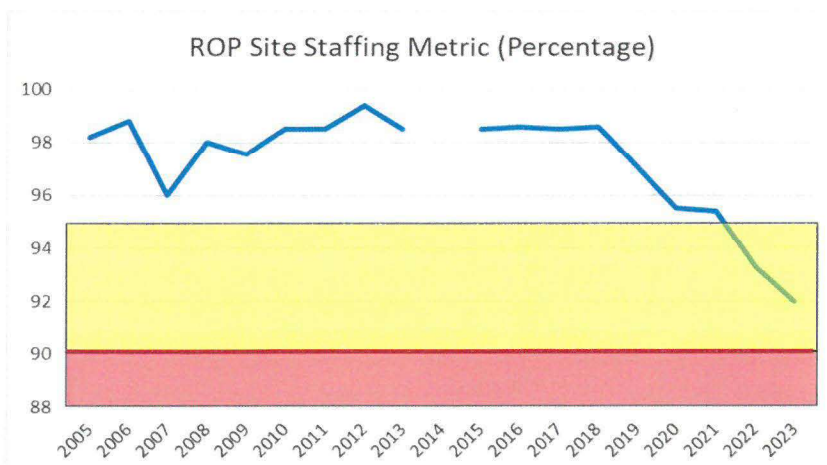


Figure 1. Reactor Oversight Process (ROP) Self-Assessment (I-5) Site Staffing Metric^{4, 5}

In February 2024, to arrest the negative trend in RI staffing reflected by this metric, the staff implemented a 15 percent annual salary retention incentive.⁶ This incentive was justified by an analysis of survey data and other information that showed increased compensation would have the

¹ Inspection Manual Chapter (IMC) 2515, "Light-Water Reactor Inspection Program—Operations Phase," April 2024, Agencywide Documents Access and Management System (ADAMS) Accession No. ML23305A237; IMC 2600, Appendix C, "Fuel Cycle Resident Inspection Program," October 2019 (ML19197A315).

² Staff Requirements Memorandum (SRM)-SECY-98-152, "Staff Requirements—SECY-98-152—Summary of Issues and Recommended Improvements to the Resident Inspector Program," August 21, 1998 (ML003752319).

³ SRM-SECY-09-0050, "Staff Requirements—SECY-09-0050—Actions to Enhance Relocation and Retention for Employees," June 26, 2009 (ML091770648).

⁴ The I-5 metric is governed by IMC 0307 Appendix A, "Reactor Oversight Process Self-Assessment Metrics and Data Trending," June 14, 2023 (ML23125A179).

⁵ There is no 2014 data because the Commission directed the staff to not conduct the ROP self-assessment that year while reformatting the program.

⁶ Note to Commissioners' Assistants, March 20, 2024 (ML23310A173).

most direct positive effect on RI retention.⁷ As of fall 2024, leading indicators suggest this retention incentive is having a positive impact on RI staffing. However, there is still concern about the ability to maintain the RI sites fully staffed.

Beyond compensation, survey and other data also suggest that changes in RI tour length could positively impact site staffing. In June 2023, when asked to rank why they are considering leaving the program, RIs listed pay first, with the relocation policy as the second reason.⁸ In July 2024, following implementation of the retention incentive, the RIs were asked the same question and pay was the lowest concern, while the relocation policy was the highest.⁹

The NRC has not formally tracked RI tour lengths, but recent data suggests most RIs serve between 4 and 5 years at a site. At the end of 2023, of the 119 total RI positions at the NRC, only 6 RIs had been at their sites for more than 6 years (5 percent), and only 5 RIs had been at their sites for between 5 and 6 years (4 percent). Regional managers are aware that most RIs start searching for new positions around their four-year point to control the terms of their relocation, for both professional and personal reasons. For professional reasons, RIs at their 4-year point may voluntarily move from a site they enjoy serving at to avoid uncertainty regarding the professional opportunities that may exist at the end of their RI tour (e.g., lack of interesting positions within the Regional Office or unappealing reactor sites to transition to). For personal reasons such as the desired timing of changes to a spouse's career or children entering or leaving schools, RIs may decide to leave the RI program significantly earlier than the 7-year tour limit or desire to stay at the same site past the 7-year tour limit. Regional Administrators can approve short extensions to RI tours with Executive Director for Operations approval required for longer extensions. Such extensions have traditionally been granted for up to 1 year and are usually tied to circumstances like children graduating from high school or short-term difficulties in selling a home. As such, extensions under the current policy have not provided the certainty to RIs that has resulted in improvements in site staffing.

Recognizing that any RI tour length policy will result in staff proactively seeking opportunities to control the terms of their relocation from both a professional and personal perspective, the staff predicts that extending tour limits to 10 years will result in a corresponding increase in the average tour length of RIs. While it is unlikely that most RIs would serve a full 10 years at a site, extending tour limits to 10 years would ideally result in average tours increasing to 6 to 8 years as RIs determine the optimal time for next position.

While increasing maximum RI tour length is a desirable change aimed at positively impacting site staffing, the staff was cautious in considering extensions in tour length and the possible negative impact to inspector objectivity. When preparing and recommending options to the Commission, the staff considered the following mitigating factors that serve to prevent, detect and address losses of inspector objectivity.

- Inspector objectivity is assured through rigorous selection and training, tour length limits, regular visits by regional senior executives and branch chiefs, and "objectivity visits" to other

⁷ Andrea D. Veil, "Request to Implement a Group Resident Inspector Program Retention Incentive Pay Authority," November 3, 2023 (ML23277A085).

⁸ Veil Memorandum.

⁹ July 2024, Resident Inspector Recruitment and Retention Survey Results, Microsoft Forms, accessed September 27, 2024 (non-public).

sites by all RIs.¹⁰ Supervisors submit a site observation form¹¹ if they have observations to contribute to the ROP self-assessment related to a site visit observation. A review of site observation forms dating back to September 2017 revealed no instances of concerns with RI objectivity.

- NRC managers have rarely removed employees from specific positions due to performance concerns, to include “for cause” transfers of RIs from their assigned site.¹² In those rare cases that involved the premature removal of inspectors, the staff found no correlation that tour time was a factor in their removal.
- Resident Inspectors, like other NRC employees, are subject to government-wide ethical standards of conduct, including standards intended to ensure that employees avoid creating the appearance of a loss of impartiality in the performance of official duties. Resident Inspectors receive training on these standards annually.¹³
- The Reactor Oversight Process limits the ability of RIs to stray from set processes when conducting inspections¹⁴ and documenting¹⁵ results. Further, the presence of inspection colleagues (e.g., other RIs and traveling inspectors) as well as frequent communication between RIs and regional management limits the potential for undetected losses of objectivity.
- Enclosure 1 provides the results of staff benchmarking at partner federal agencies that have field office programs like the NRC’s RI program. This benchmarking revealed that the NRC’s federal partners have not experienced objectivity concerns, even in programs with no tour length restrictions.

Based on the mitigating factors in place, the staff believes that a loss of objectivity caused by an extension in RI tour length is unlikely but if it occurs, it would be detected through the rigorous governance standards in place. Given the low likelihood of loss of objectivity and in consideration of continued RI retention challenges, the staff evaluated the following four options for Commission consideration:

1. Maintain 7-year tour limits (status quo).
2. Maintain 7-year tour limits but allow for incremental renewals.
3. Establish a new 10-year tour limit.
4. Eliminate tour limits.

Option 1: Maintain 7-year tour length limits

This option maintains the current 7-year tour limit for RIs. While this option keeps a time-tested system for maintaining inspector objectivity, it does not resolve one of the central drivers of the RI

¹⁰ IMC 0102, “Oversight and Objectivity of Inspectors and Examiners at Reactor Facilities,” April 24, 2013 (ML12012A053).

¹¹ NRC Form 0649, “Site Visit Observation,” October 1, 2024 (ML13083A241)

¹² Management Directive 10.67, “General Grade Performance Management System,” September 19, 2019 (ML19119A071).

¹³ Management Directive 7.5, “Ethics Counseling and Training,” December 4, 2024 (ML24366A076).

¹⁴ IMC 2515 Appendix A, “Risk-Informed Baseline Inspection Program,” July 26, 2019 (ML18180A098).

¹⁵ IMC 0612, “Issue Screening,” August 9, 2023 (ML23067A031).

retention issue, the required relocation between tours. While leading indicators (e.g., I-5 metric quarterly updates for 2024 and survey data) suggest that the recently implemented retention incentive is having a positive impact on site staffing, it is not clear that maintaining the status quo will sufficiently mitigate the historical retention challenges partially associated with relocation requirements. If the status quo is maintained and the NRC continues to have trouble in staffing the RI sites, the staff may need to mitigate retention challenges through other means, including increasing relocation and retention incentives or adjusting the special salary schedule as limited by statutory salary caps for Federal employees.

Option 2: Maintain 7-year tour length limits but allow for incremental renewals

This option establishes a formal renewal process allowing extensions of tour length to reduce the burden of frequent relocation. Under this new process, RIs could apply for tour length extensions beyond 1 year based on a variety of factors that would be established following Commission approval of this option. In benchmarking other organizations, the staff learned that the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) generally requires 2-to-4-year tours for its special agents and allows extensions for certain locations, depending on the ability to staff the location and the needs of the agency. Like NCIS, this option could be made flexible, depending on historical site-staffing difficulties.

Potential issues with incremental tour length renewals include the unpredictability of career planning for RIs due to uncertainty as to whether extensions would be granted, or the opposite; i.e., that extensions are rarely (or never) disapproved, resulting in the process becoming an unnecessary step rather than a control of objectivity.

Option 3: Establish a new 10-year tour length limit

This option addresses RI relocation concerns by shifting to a 10-year term length which the staff believes is a substantial enough change to have an appreciable positive effect on retention while still mitigating inspector objectivity concerns. The option has positive benefits in that it provides RIs more flexibility in their career and relocation decisions while not restricting RIs who wish to pursue moves to more senior staff positions.

Potential issues with this option include fewer opportunities for RIs to move between sites, which could delay and limit the benefits of fresh perspectives that come with more frequent resident site turnover.

Option 4: Eliminate tour length limits

This option completely removes RI tour length limits. While RIs would still relocate, the timing of these moves would be dependent on when it best suits their individual career and/or personal needs. Under this option, RIs could potentially choose to remain at a site for their entire career, reducing the need for relocations but also limiting opportunities at some resident sites for extended periods. This change could strengthen the RI expertise at a specific site but also hurt the benefits from fresh perspectives seen when assigning new inspectors to a site. Further, this policy could result in stagnation of career development due to reduced promotion opportunities. This option also introduces an increased risk of a loss of objectivity, which may require the staff to implement added measures to safeguard against. It is difficult to predict the program risks associated with eliminating

tour length limits completely, but the staff anticipates such a substantial change will significantly alter the NRC's RI program.

RECOMMENDATION:

The staff recommends option 3 to extend RI tour length limits from 7 to 10 years to address the continued difficulty in staffing RI program positions. Relocation concerns have now become RIs' most cited reason why they would consider leaving the program and extensions in tour length would help mitigate future retention challenges. The staff assesses the risks of continued RI staffing will be minimal if RI tour length limit is increased to 10 years. Based on the typical behavior that RIs under the 7-year tour limit, most RIs would not actually serve 10-year tours. The staff estimates that fewer than 10 percent would serve greater than 8 years at the same site but average tour lengths will increase from the current 4-6 years to closer to 6-8 years. This extension in average tour length will greatly improve the NRC's ability to maintain RI site staffing while providing a secondary benefit of reducing NRC relocation expenses.

The staff evaluated concerns involving the loss of objectivity if RI tour length is extended and determined that current programs and procedures in place provide safeguards against an undetected loss of inspector objectivity. These measures included management site objectivity visits, required ethics training, and the structure of ROP governance that includes at least two inspectors at every site as well as regular visits from regional management and other inspectors.

The Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation would track the effectiveness of this change and report to the Commission annually through the resident health program.¹⁶

RESOURCES:

This proposal does not change full-time equivalent allocation. Regardless of the option adopted (except status quo) the staff assumes there will be a reduction in change of station expenses and travel expenses because of reduced turnover and backfill assignments.

¹⁶ IMC 0307 Appendix D, "Resident Inspector Retention and Recruitment Program Monitoring and Assessment," February 12, 2025 (ML24352A244).

COORDINATION:

This paper has been coordinated with the Office of the General Counsel, which has no legal objection. The Office of the Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this paper for resource implications and has no objections.



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Enclosure:
Benchmarking

SUBJECT: RECOMMENDATION TO INCREASE RESIDENT INSPECTOR TOUR LENGTH
DATED: May 21, 2025

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