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NRC ISSUES FINAL REVISIONS TO REGULATIONS ON RESPIRATORY PROTECTION

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is amending its regulations governing the use of respiratory protection equipment and other controls to restrict internal exposure to radioactive material.

The revised rules provide greater assurance that workers' radiation exposures will be maintained as low as is reasonably achievable, and approve for licensee use advances in respiratory protection equipment and procedures. The new rules are more performance-based, more flexible and easier to implement. The NRC believes the new rules will save licensees a total of about \$1.5 million per year, with no reduction in worker health and safety.

When the Commission's overall radiation protection regulations were significantly revised in 1991, the rules for respiratory protection were not similarly revised because the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) was working on a consensus standard in this area. This standard, ANSI Z88.2-1992, "American National Standard Practice for Respiratory Protection," is now available and is essentially the technical basis for this rule. The Commission's rule is consistent with the general mandate of the Technology Transfer and Advancement Act of 1995 (Public Law 104-113) to encourage Federal agencies to use consensus standards. The new rules are also consistent with new respiratory protection regulations published recently by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

The changes emphasize the use of process or engineering controls, decontamination of work areas, access controls, and other procedures instead of the use of respiratory protection devices, which tend to increase external radiation doses and worker stress.

The rules also recognize new respiratory protection devices that have been proven effective, discourage the use of other devices that are now considered less effective based on field tests, and revise requirements for respiratory protection procedures such as testing to evaluate the fit of a respirator on a particular individual.

The rules also revise the "assigned protection factors" -- expected workplace levels of respiratory protection that would be provided to properly fitted and trained users by using properly functioning respirators--to be consistent with ANSI evaluations.

Further details of the final rules are contained in a Federal Register notice to be published shortly.

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