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NRC ISSUES PROPOSED REVISIONS TO REGULATIONS ON RESPIRATORY PROTECTION

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission is proposing to amend its regulations governing the use of respiratory protection equipment and other controls to restrict internal exposures to radioactive material.

The revised rules would provide greater assurance that workers' radiation exposures will be maintained as low as is reasonably achievable and would approve for licensee use advances in respiratory protection equipment and procedures. The NRC believes the proposed rule would save licensees about \$2 million per year, with no reduction in worker health or safety.

When the Commission's overall radiation protection regulations were significantly revised in 1992, the rules for respiratory protection were not similarly revised because the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) was working on consensus guidance in this area. The new ANSI guidance, "American National Standard Practice for Respiratory Protection," is now available and is essentially the technical basis for the proposed rule. The Commission's proposed rule is consistent with the general mandate of the Technology Transfer Act of 1996 (Public Law 104-113) to utilize consensus standards.

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

The rule also revises the “assigned protection factors”--expected workplace levels of respiratory protection that would be provided to properly fitted and trained users by properly functioning respirators--to be consistent with ANSI evaluations.

Further details of the proposed rule are contained in a Federal Register notice to be published shortly. Interested persons are invited to submit written comments on the proposal within 75 days after publication of the Federal Register notice to the Secretary, U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Washington, DC 20555-0001, Attention: Rulemakings and Adjudications Staff. Comments may also be submitted electronically, as described in the Federal Register notice.

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