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NRC UPDATES GUIDANCE TO LICENSEES FOR EXTENDED STORAGE OF LOW-LEVEL RADIOACTIVE WASTE

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has issued updated guidance to its fuel cycle and materials licensees regarding the potential need to store some low-level radioactive waste onsite for an extended period after the low-level waste disposal facility in Barnwell, S.C., closes to much of the nation.

NRC regulations establish safety requirements for the near-surface disposal of low-level waste, which is classified as Class A, B or C depending on its hazard and physical characteristics. About 96 percent of all commercial low-level waste generated in the United States is Class A, the least hazardous.

The Low-Level Radioactive Waste Policy Act, as amended, gave states the responsibility for disposing of low-level radioactive waste and created a system of interstate compacts to create and manage disposal facilities. There are currently three licensed low-level waste disposal facilities. One, in Clive, Utah, accepts only Class A waste from licensees in all states. A second facility, near Richland, Wash., accepts all classes of low-level waste from the 11 states in the Northwest and Rocky Mountain compacts (Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Alaska, Hawaii, Nevada, Colorado and New Mexico). The Barnwell facility has accepted all types of waste from the rest of the country, but because of declining disposal capacity South Carolina has said the site will only accept waste from the three states of the Atlantic compact (South Carolina, New Jersey and Connecticut) as of July 1.

The closure of Barnwell will leave licensees in 36 states with no disposal options for Class B and C waste. About 95 percent of Class B and C waste is generated by nuclear power plants, which have the space, expertise and experience needed to store radioactive wastes for extended periods. The Nuclear Energy Institute, along with the Electric Power Research Institute, has prepared updated low-level waste storage guidance for nuclear power plants affected by Barnwell's closure. These groups submitted the guidance to NRC May 13 for review and possible endorsement, if NRC agrees with it.

The remainder of the Class B and C waste consists primarily of liquid wastes from radiochemical producers and sealed radioactive sources from industrial, research or medical licensees. These licensees are the intended audience of NRC's updated guidance. While some of these licensees may have some experience in storing radioactive wastes for short periods, the need for extended interim storage may present new challenges. These are addressed in the guidance.

The guidance advises licensees to consider ways to minimize the production of Class B and Class C low-level wastes, and to consider whether they may need to seek a license amendment to increase their possession limit for radioactive materials as a result of the need to store waste onsite. The guidance also addresses considerations such as security, worker safety, and the need to keep track of radioactive materials, including during emergencies.

In addition to NRC licensees, the guidance has been provided to regulatory authorities in the 35 Agreement States that regulate the commercial uses of radioactive materials under agreements with the NRC. Those state agencies may use the guidance as they deem appropriate to meet the needs of their regulatory programs.

NRC Regulatory Issue Summary 2008-12, "Considerations for Extended Interim Storage of Low-Level Radioactive Waste by Fuel Cycle and Materials Licensees," is available on the NRC Web site at <http://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/doc-collections/gen-comm/reg-issues/2008/index.html>.

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