

NEWS FROM BEYOND NUCLEAR

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National Coalition Urges Nuclear Regulatory Commission to Better Safeguard Radioactive Wastes at Atomic Reactors *Petitioners Cite Grave Risks of Attacks, Accidents, and Leaks*

Takoma Park, MD—A coalition of dozens of national and grassroots environmental and safe energy organizations has filed an official petition for rulemaking with the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) urging safety and security upgrades on high-level radioactive waste containers. The petitioners include national groups Alliance for Nuclear Accountability, Beyond Nuclear, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, Nuclear Information and Resource Service, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Public Citizen, and SUN DAY Campaign, as well as numerous grassroots groups across the country.

The groups call upon NRC to strengthen quality assurance rules on the design and manufacture of dry storage casks. These outdoor concrete and steel silos are used at most atomic reactors across the country to store irradiated nuclear fuel. The groups cite the risks of disastrous releases of radioactivity into the air, soil, and water due to accidents, attacks, or eventual leakage, and demand that safeguards be strengthened. The petition is posted on the Beyond Nuclear home page, www.beyondnuclear.org.

The petition for rulemaking was initiated by the C-10 Foundation, a watchdog group based in Massachusetts within ten miles of New Hampshire's Seabrook nuclear power station. NRC recently approved Seabrook owner Florida Power and Light's request to install dry cask storage. But C-10's research indicated that the NRC regulations for the design, construction, and certification of dry storage casks are woefully inadequate.

"NRC continues to certify casks based on technical design criteria for a twenty-year deployment, when in fact they will actually store high-level radioactive waste on-site at reactors indefinitely, many decades into the future," said Debbie Grinnell, C-10 Foundation Research Assistant and author of the petition for rulemaking.

"As the federal government fails to protect the public against the risks associated with high-level radioactive wastes, states will inevitably inherit the problem," Grinnell added. "These risks will continue on long after the reactors are shut down and decommissioned. Funding will be needed for generations to come to manage these forever deadly radioactive wastes," Grinnell concluded.

The 104 operating atomic reactors across the U.S. each generate 20 to 30 tons of irradiated nuclear fuel each year. At least 60,000 tons have accumulated to date in the U.S. Since the indoor waste storage pools at almost 80 of the 104 reactors are already filled to capacity, nuclear utilities have turned to outdoor dry cask storage. More than two dozen permanently shut down reactors, and even several completely dismantled nuclear power plants, still store the high-level radioactive wastes they generated on site in dry casks, since the U.S. lacks a national repository.

As of three years ago, the most recent data readily available to the public, nearly 800 dry casks had already been loaded at 36 nuclear power plant sites. An additional 13 nuclear plants were poised to begin installing dry casks. NRC estimates that by 2015, almost all operating reactors will have established dry cask storage. Each dry cask contains over 200 times the long-lasting radioactivity released by the Hiroshima atomic bomb.

“Industry and even NRC inspectors themselves have blown the whistle on widespread safety problems with radioactive waste storage casks around the country,” said Kevin Kamps at Beyond Nuclear in Takoma Park, Maryland. “Yet, even despite their own safety staff warning the casks violate codes and regulations, the NRC continues to rubberstamp approval for their extended use. If and when these casks fail, the result could be disastrous in terms of harm to human health and environmental contamination.”