

NUKEWATCH

QUARTERLY



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EPA's Plan to Raise Radiation Exposures Challenged

WASHINGTON, DC (ENS) — Public employees have filed a lawsuit demanding documents related to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's plans made "in secrecy" to allow public exposure to increased levels of radioactivity following nuclear accidents or attacks. The lawsuit filed October 30 under the Freedom of Information Act by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) claims that the agency "wrongfully withheld" comments submitted by EPA and other federal and state agency officials, and by representatives of private corporations or trade associations, to the EPA Office of Radiation and Indoor Air as it prepared its updated Protective Action Guides.

The new radiation guides would increase allowable public exposure to radioactivity in drinking water, including a nearly 1,000-fold increase in strontium-90, a 3,000 to 100,000-fold hike for iodine-131 and an almost 25,000-fold increase for nickel-63.

The radiation guides are protocols for responding to incidents ranging from nuclear reactor accidents, to radioactive transportation spills, to dirty bombs.

"The new draft standards have been promulgated in secrecy despite sharp controversy about allowing public exposure to radiation levels vastly higher than those EPA had previously deemed unacceptably dangerous," claims PEER, a national nonprofit alliance of resource professionals employed by government agencies at the local, state and federal levels.

"EPA has bypassed open dialogue on how much radiation the public will be allowed to receive in the event of a release, and is now suppressing evidence of internal dissent on these controversial proposals," said PEER Executive Director Jeff Ruch.

PEER said in a statement Oct. 30 that it has received "verbal reports that both internal and external reviewers registered grave concerns about the radical relaxation of radiation exposure limits being proposed."

In its lawsuit, PEER claims the comments are a matter of public concern because they address whether EPA is meeting its mission of protecting the environment and public health with respect to radiation releases.

The new radiation guidance would also allow long-term cleanup standards thousands of times more lax than anything EPA has ever before accepted, permitting doses to the public that EPA itself estimates would cause a cancer in every fourth person exposed.

These relaxations of radiation protection requirements are favored by the nuclear industry and allies in the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and Energy Department, PEER claims.

The plan to relax radiation standards was signed off on in the final days of the Bush administration, and suspended by the new Obama administration prior to its publication. Obama EPA appointees are now weighing the plan.

On June 11, 2009, PEER submitted a request under the Freedom of Information Act for all of the comments to the Office of Radiation and Indoor Air. ORIA has yet to produce any of the documents requested, months beyond the response deadlines mandated under the Freedom of Information Act.

On Oct. 16, EPA's Office of General Counsel directed ORIA to comply but conceded that the only way to enforce its order would be in court. ORIA had not met previous self-announced timelines

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Retiring Reference Man*

By Arjun Makhijani, Ph.D., and Lisa Ledwidge

Reference Man — a hypothetical adult white male — is currently the basis of many federal regulations and compliance guidelines, including workplace radiation exposures, cleanup of radioactively contaminated sites, and some radionuclide limits in drinking water, notably alpha radiation-emitting transuranic radionuclides.

The use of Reference Man is scientifically inappropriate because the vast majority of people, including women and children, fall outside the definition:

Reference man is defined as being between 20-30 years of age, weighing 70 kg [154 pounds], is 170 cm [5 feet, 7 inches] in height, and lives in a climate with an average temperature of from 10° to 20°C [50° to 68° F]. He is a Caucasian and is a Western European or North American in habitat and custom. (International Commission on Radiological Protection, 1975).

The continued use of Reference Man does not take into account the greater radiation doses received by some parts of the population that result from the same environmental conditions and the higher cancer risks per unit of dose that they face. This especially applies to women (including pregnant women) and children.

Specifically, the overall fatal cancer risk experienced by females is 37.5 percent greater than that experienced by males for the same radiation exposure. The differential cancer incidence risk is even higher (52 percent higher for women than men).



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