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USNRC

*This is appalling! Don't put recycled contaminated items into domestic or international uses. Don't destroy the future. Instead destroy the radiated materials.*

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VIEWPOINTS

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# Radioactive contamination

## A bad plan: Nuclear Regulatory Commission wants to start putting contaminants in everyday items.

By Sara Barczak

**S**oon our homes could become radioactively contaminated, and we wouldn't even know it.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Department of Energy would like to cut the costs of closing down all those old commercial nuclear power plants and nuclear weapons facilities by selling massive amounts of radioactive metals to the scrap metal industry. Sounds like the NRC and DOE finally understand how to recycle and save pennies, right?

Wrong. NRC's "recycle" and "reuse" concept would introduce radioactive metals, without our permission, into thousands of everyday items: pots and pans, children's braces, toys, pet car carriers, belt buckles and zippers, even the furniture we sit on. And the NRC isn't just looking at metals; it wants to recycle everything it can from these nuclear facilities — radioactively contaminated plastics, soils, concretes and more.

The NRC is currently determining what level of radioactivity these raw materials can contain — essentially deciding how much exposure our families can handle. This level could be equivalent to an extra X-ray per year or more. Doesn't sound too bad, does it? But keep in mind that we could receive these radiation donations courtesy of the NRC from many products for extended periods of time throughout the year. We could receive doses of radiation from our cars, the rings on our fingers, the file cabinets next to our desks and the utensils at the diner. Should we really be worried about radiation we didn't ask for?

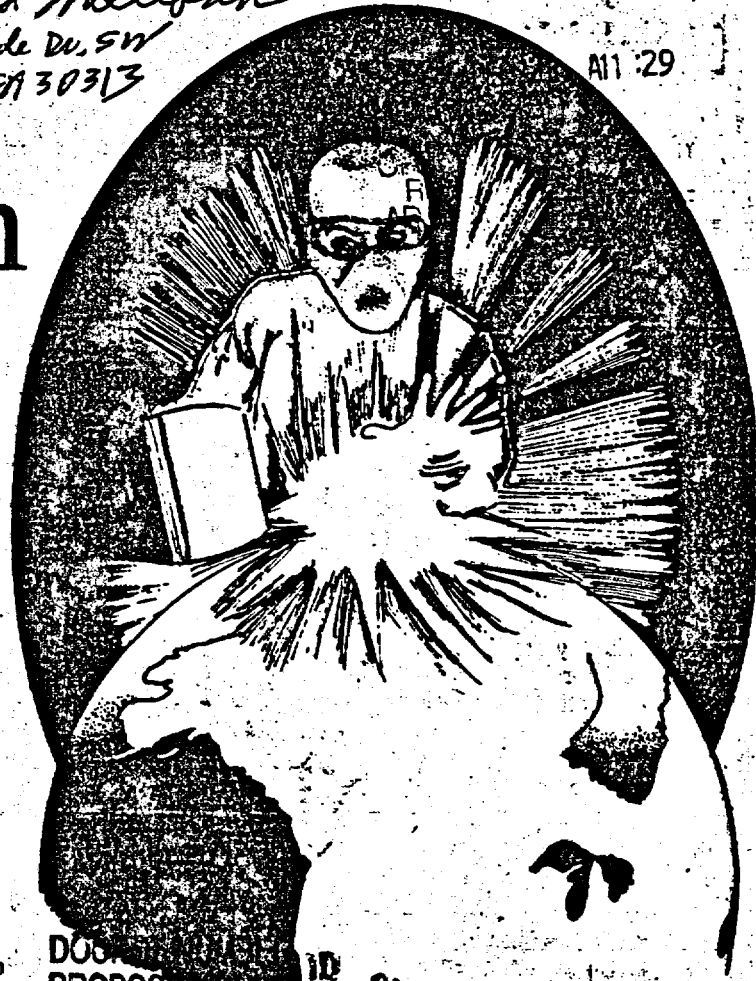
Well, the NRC is considering radiation doses that, when received over a lifetime, could cause fatal cancer in four in 10,000 people, according to the NRC's own calculations. With the current U.S. population hovering above 270 million, that translates to more than 108,000 additional deaths.

A generally accepted scientific fact is that there is no totally safe dose of radiation. Dr. Karl Morgan, the father of radiological health physics, said, "There is no safe level of exposure and there is no dose of radiation so low that the risk of a malignancy is zero." It is unacceptable for the NRC to debate doses that could result in the loss of lives.

The Steel Manufacturers Association has already expressed deep concern about the additional radiation, especially because nationwide more than 2 million to 3 million tons of radioactive scrap will head its way under the NRC's plans.

The DOE wants to allow contractors to release scrap metal into the stream of commerce, where all signs of the scrap's origins, such as labeling, are removed. The SMA's 1999 Public Policy Statement said, "[Our] companies oppose the release of contaminated scrap and have zero tolerance for acceptance of radioactive material. Furthermore, melting radioactive scrap could threaten worker safety and health, consumers and the environment."

SMA member companies have already spent millions of dollars on sensitive radiation detectors at their mills to prevent contamination. Their sensors have already been triggered, mostly by contaminated foreign steel, and shipments have been returned. Case-by-case DOE releases have occurred despite public opposition. More than 1 million pounds of radioactive metals have been released into the marketplace from several closed nuclear operations buildings at Oak Ridge, Tenn. The proposed new rules would legalize the routine release of massive amounts of radioactive materials. Even the current, unsafe case-by-



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case release procedures would no longer be necessary.

How can the NRC allow further radioactive contamination of the public — you and me, even our children — without us knowing about it? The public comment period for the proposed new rules ends Dec. 22 and gives all of us an extremely brief chance to tell the NRC how we feel about radiation contaminating our daily household items. The impact of this rule is global and long-term in its effect on people and the environment. The NRC should carefully isolate these materials. Additionally, the NRC should extend the deadline for public comment to allow for a fair evaluation of its proposal.

Mail your comments by Dec. 22 to NRC Chairman Richard Meserve, Attention: Rule-making and Adjudications Staff, U.S. NRC, Washington, DC 20555; fax to 301-415-1101 or e-mail [secy@nrc.gov](mailto:secy@nrc.gov).

For more information on the Internet, go to <http://www.nirs.org>.

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