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No. 96-185

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
(Thursday, December 19, 1996)

COMMISSION APPROVES RULEMAKING PLAN FOR UTILITY ROLE  
IN INITIAL REACTOR OPERATOR LICENSE EXAMINATIONS

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has authorized the NRC staff to develop a rule requiring that all nuclear power plant licensees prepare — under NRC direction — initial reactor operator license examinations.

The proposed rule will be prepared for Commission review and approval for public comment early next year. Until a final rule is adopted, applicants for operator licenses will continue to be examined by using either NRC-prepared tests or those prepared by utilities participating voluntarily in an NRC-supervised pilot program begun last year. The Commission will take the agency's experience with the pilot program into consideration when it evaluates both the proposed and final rules.

Reactor operator applicants seeking a license to manipulate the controls of a nuclear power plant must pass both a comprehensive, multiple-choice written test and a practical, hands-on examination. The generic fundamentals examination, a second written test that each applicant must pass to be considered for the final license examination, will continue to be written and administered by the NRC. In the practical phase, applicants must demonstrate a mastery of plant systems and procedures, and the ability to deal with operational events on a control room simulator. Licenses are issued for a specific facility.

The rulemaking plan includes these provisions:

- NRC will continue to administer and grade the control room simulator and plant walk-through examination phases, during which each candidate is evaluated on a one-on-one basis.
- All examinations drafted by utilities will be subject to review, modification and approval by NRC examiners before the tests are given. NRC will have the option of preparing a test in lieu of accepting or modifying one prepared by a utility.

- To be approved by NRC, examinations must comply with detailed NRC guidance which deals with such matters as appropriate level of difficulty, maintenance of examination security, and restrictions on test preparation by those significantly involved in training license applicants. The guidance document, "Operator Licensing Examination Standards for Power Reactors" (NUREG-1021), has been revised to implement the new process.
- Once the new licensing examination process has become fully operational, the NRC staff will prepare at least one examination annually in each of the agency's four regions to ensure that the staff maintains its proficiency in examination writing and to serve as a quality check on the process.

Historically, either NRC staff examiners or NRC contractors have prepared and administered all operator license tests. But in April 1995, the Commission approved a staff proposal that the agency begin evaluating a system wherein nuclear power plant licensees would prepare the tests under NRC oversight. The Commission took this action to recognize substantial improvements in industry training programs, to make the operator licensing program more efficient, and to realize budgetary savings.

The staff solicited volunteers for a pilot program in a letter sent to all nuclear utilities in August of last year, and launched the program two months later. Between October 1995 and April of this year, the staff reviewed and approved 22 operator licensing examinations prepared by utilities in accordance with published NRC guidance. These examinations were used to test 146 applicants for reactor operator and senior reactor operator licenses.

After a staff briefing in June, the Commission authorized continuation of the pilot program through July 1997 to provide time for the rulemaking process. About half the initial reactor operator licensing examinations now being given are prepared by utilities taking part in the voluntary, pilot program.

It is estimated that the new license examination process would permit the NRC to save between \$3 million and \$4 million paid annually to contractors for support of operator licensing and requalification inspection programs. Unaffected by the new rule is the licensing of operators for non-power reactors, who will continue to be examined by the NRC. Also unchanged is the present system whereby utilities prepare and administer requalification examinations to licensed operators as part of an NRC-approved training program.

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