



May 25, 2010

Chairman Gregory B. Jaczko
Commissioner George Apostolakis
Commissioner William D. Magwood, IV
Commissioner William C. Ostendorff
Commissioner Kristine L. Svinicki

Dear Chairman Jaczko & Commissioners

On April 20th, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) held a meeting seeking public input into the NRC's handling of groundwater contamination at nuclear reactor sites across the United States.

During the meeting, it was brought to our attention that on July 5, 2006, the NRC's Office of General Counsel (OGC) issued a letter to the Illinois Attorney General threatening to intervene in Illinois v Exelon Corp., No. 06 MR 248 (Will County Court) (Attached). The NRC's OGC wrote that, "if the lawsuit moves forward one option for us is to seek leave to participate in the lawsuit to raise the Commission's preemption concerns."

Today we seek further clarification regarding the NRC's intent with respect to similar situations. In situations where States find that their drinking water resources are being affected by inadvertent discharges from licensed nuclear facilities, we hope that the NRC already recognizes that States have an obligation to protect their citizens that is not preempted by the Atomic Energy Act. Although we are gratified that recent comments by the NRC in the press have recognized the "states have a role to play" in such situations, this is somewhat vague. Please confirm in writing that the NRC recognizes that it is both legal and appropriate for the States to take action against licensees when drinking water is under threat.

This recognition of State powers in this area would not deprive the NRC of the means to regulate such situations. Congress has made it clear that the specific language of the AEA expressly prohibits the NRC from licensing source, special nuclear, or byproduct materials if the operation “would be inimical to the common defense and security or the health and safety of the public.” 42 USC § 2099; 42 USC § 2034; and 42 USC § 2077(c)(2). Put simply, the NRC may not allow a nuclear facility to operate in an unsafe manner. We presume the Commission would agree with such a characterization of its obligations and takes a broad view of those powers. We also presume the Commission is equally troubled that there have been dozens of instances in the recent past of contaminated groundwater at licensed NRC reactor facilities. If the Commission had been taking sufficient action pursuant to these powers, we believe States would not have felt an obligation to intervene. We believe that the recent trend of increasing State involvement with nuclear facilities can be traced to a lack of adequate action by the NRC.

Rather than enforcing regulations governing the unmonitored and uncontrolled release of radiation into groundwater, the NRC endorsed a voluntary industry initiative run by the industry’s trade association, the Nuclear Energy Institute. We think it is time for the Commission to take a different path. At the very least, we urge that the NRC should not try to handcuff states performing the work that the agency should have been doing in the first instance. Indeed, we think it notable and deserving of Congressional attention if the NRC were to exercise its preemptive authority on behalf of the nuclear industry in order to block state regulators from holding nuclear corporations accountable for the contamination of drinking water resources. Indeed, the NRC’s actions in the Illinois case referenced above clearly illustrate that clarification of the AEA’s apportionment of regulatory authority to protect important economic and environmental resources – such as a State’s vital interest in protecting its groundwater – is long overdue. We can assure you that any further attempts to handcuff state governments under the guise of federal preemption will precipitate greater controversy.

When drinking water is not under threat, the regulatory situation is less clear. The nuclear industry has already aggressively exploited this lack of regulatory clarity in what state regulators can and cannot do. And equally important, the industry finds comfort in the assurance that the NRC has, thus far, required little and even threatened to preempt those States that have the temerity to enforce requirements protective of public health and the environment.

This lack of regulatory clarity was illustrated at the April 20th meeting. Even the nuclear industry’s advocates admitted “[t]he plants did not have legal authorization to release radioactive material to groundwater.” But on the other hand, an industry advocate at the Morgan Lewis firm stated that while “(t)he Clean Water Act requires a permit to discharge any pollutant into a water of the United States,” he/she points out that “groundwater is NOT a water of the United States.” (Both presentations were provided to NRC by Greenpeace after the April

20th meeting but are still unavailable for public review in the NRC's publicly accessible ADAMS database.) Many states' laws prohibit unpermitted discharges of radioactive substances to groundwater, but the ability of the states to enforce these laws against licensed nuclear facilities has not been tested.

It is evident that the nuclear industry and its attorneys recognize that they lack the legal authority to release radiation or any pollutant into groundwater. We believe such action is clearly "inimical to the health and safety of the public." We are therefore dismayed that the NRC remains reluctant, at best, to act on such matters. Given the lack of NRC action in this area, the public is at a loss to understand why the NRC's OGC would countenance interference with State efforts to protect groundwater.

As a result of the groundwater contamination issues at dozens of operating nuclear reactor sites across the country, NRC's credibility as a regulator of the public health and safety has been called into question. Since the NRC has chosen not to enforce its mandate to protect human health and safety with respect to the multiple groundwater contamination issues, we strongly urge the NRC to cease any attempts to preempt state governments from exercising their authority to protect important economic and environmental resources within their borders.

Sincerely,

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CC: Senator Bernie Sanders, Senator Patrick Leahy, Senator Charles Schumer, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, Senator Frank Lautenberg, Senator Robert Menendez, Congressman Edward J. Markey, Congressman John Adler, Congressman John Hall, Congressman Dennis Kucinich, Congressman Christopher H. Smith, Congressman Peter Welch