

lic has resulted in a dispute between the two federal agencies whose job it is to set radiation standards: the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the report noted, with this disagreement most visible in the proposed standards for the prospective Yucca Mountain high-level waste repository and in standards for the cleanup and decommissioning of federal and commercial nuclear facilities. For these applications, the report notes, the EPA favors both (1) a public protection limit of 15 millirem a year from all radiation sources through all means of exposure and (2) extra protection from groundwater resources under sites, at limits originally set for community drinking water systems, equivalent to 4 millirem

per year. On the other hand, the NRC favors a single 25-millirem all-pathway public protection limit.

In both these cases, the report concludes, it remains to be seen whether the EPA and the NRC can resolve their differences or whether Congress will need to intervene.

In addition, the report notes, even though the EPA, the NRC, and the DOE do not have estimates for all U.S. nuclear sites of the costs of complying with different cleanup standards to achieve different protection levels, officials from these agencies said that achieving more restrictive protection levels can be considerably more expensive.

Not surprisingly, the NRC and the EPA had different reactions to the report. The NRC agreed with the conclusions, the GAO stated, but the EPA disagreed, stating that it interprets the information presented in the report differently.

In conclusion, the GAO said that the congressional committees of jurisdiction "may wish to reconcile EPA's and NRC's policy differences on groundwater protection for Yucca Mountain." Also, it stated, these committees may wish to clarify the agencies' regulatory responsibilities relating to the cleanup and decommissioning of nuclear sites.

The report can be accessed on the Internet at www.gao.gov.

DOE Selects EBR-II Spent-Fuel Treatment Method

In late July, the U.S. Department of Energy selected electro-metallurgical technology as the preferred alternative for treating the sodium-bonded spent nuclear fuel from the Experimental Breeder Reactor-II at its Argonne National Laboratory-West facility in Idaho. The DOE's selection of the alternative comes after 18 months of analysis and public input. An independent review completed earlier this year by the National Research Council found no technical barriers to the use of this technology in treating the EBR-II fuel.

Treatment of sodium-bonded fuel from the Fermi-1 reactor, which is currently stored at the DOE's Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory, is not included in this preferred treatment decision. Rather, the DOE will investigate other treatment techniques and make a final decision on this fuel at a later date. ■

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