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## Rules for nuke incidents under review

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 20 (UPI) – Federal agencies are taking another look at regulations governing how state and local governments react to incidents at nuclear power plants, officials said Wednesday.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Federal Emergency Management Agency conferred with states, utility companies and other concerned parties at FEMA's headquarters on a proposed revision to FEMA's Radiological Emergency Preparedness program.

The change would apply to how state and local officials spread the word about a "fast-breaking" emergency, said Randy Sullivan of the NRC's Nuclear Regulatory Research group.

"These regulations speak to the need for (an operator) to ensure that offsite response organizations have the ability to notify the public," Sullivan said. "The issue is that rapid notification ... the design objective of that (offsite) capability is 15 minutes."

What's at issue is how long public officials have to decide on issuing an alert.

Alan Nelson, senior project manager at the Nuclear Energy Institute, a lobbying group, told the meeting earlier regulations allowed for a range of decision time, depending on the severity of the incident. The change would require an "urgent action" alert to be finished 15 minutes after an operator's notice, he said.

Several states have told the NRC the change robs them of the ability to use existing plans and procedures.

"Offsite environmental factors, such as weather or road conditions ... could significantly influence the effectiveness of any protective actions," the Illinois Department of Nuclear Safety said in a letter. "Responsible offsite decision-makers should be allowed a reasonable period of time to consider these issues."

There also is the question of how multiple jurisdictions would deal with such a deadline, said Mike Nawoj, of the New Hampshire Office of Emergency Management. For instance, handling situations at the Seabrook Station plant on the New Hampshire coast also involves Massachusetts and Maine, he said, so it is unclear which decision-maker would be affected.

The idea of a short deadline has some merit, however, Nawoj added. Procedures for dealing with the new REP rules might be applicable to many fast-breaking but non-nuclear emergencies, so the discussion should be targeted at a wider audience, he said.

Pennsylvania officials said their governor is the only person in the state who can order an evacuation. Since the state's standard response to a nuclear emergency would be evacuating people within 10 miles of a plant, the governor would not want to be rushed into that serious a decision, they said.

FEMA's Nancy Goldstein reminded the meeting simply telling the public an incident had occurred would meet the 15-minute requirements, leaving more time to decide on a course of action. Sullivan suggested a default announcement could tell an area's residents to take shelter until more information is available.

Many states, however, want to take more proactive measures, Nelson said, which leaves them facing the deadline dilemma.

Sullivan said the NRC will turn the information gathered at Wednesday's meeting into an exercise evaluation document for FEMA to review.

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