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Letter to the Editor/Washington Post

Your recent story about the GAO's report on keeping track of waste at nuclear power plants failed to inform readers about the many safety and security provisions already in place to protect the public from spent nuclear fuel radiological hazards, and the significant actions the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has taken and continues to take to ensure proper accounting of spent nuclear fuel.

Nor did the story reflect the fact that no one has ever been harmed by spent fuel rods or fragments. Further, the story did not acknowledge that the few pieces of spent fuel rod which could not be accounted for were identified through NRC initiatives.

Spent fuel at nuclear plants was well protected before Sept. 11, 2001, by physical barriers, armed guards, intrusion detection systems, area surveillance systems, access controls and access authorization requirements for plant employees. Security enhancements ordered by the NRC since Sept. 11 have made the fuel even more secure. The likelihood that spent fuel could be stolen from a spent fuel pool and end up in a terrorist's hands is extremely remote, given the security in place, including the difficulty of getting material past sensitive radiation alarms and the physically disabling radiation from the spent fuel itself. Although the likelihood of spent fuel getting outside a facility is extremely low, the NRC is working to improve control and accounting of spent fuel to provide additional assurances of safety and security.

Beginning in November 2003, the NRC increased its checks through its resident inspectors who work daily at each nuclear plant, questioning licensees about their material control and accounting (MC&A) programs. This led to the discovery that pieces of spent fuel rods were unaccounted for at the Vermont Yankee and Humboldt Bay plants. Vermont Yankee later found its fuel pieces. Plants have been asked to confirm their spent fuel records and inventories and to provide additional information about their accounting of spent fuel. This will help the NRC conduct more detailed inspections by MC&A experts planned for those plants where questions about possible accounting and control weaknesses may still exist.

Nuclear power plants are required to keep complete records and conduct annual physical inventories of all their special nuclear material, including sent fuel rods and pieces. The NRC plans to develop guidance for implementing regulations, for conducting physical inventories, accounting and control of rod pieces and to clarify existing procedures for MC&A inspections. The NRC is taking actions to ensure accurate accounting records and inventory controls are in place so that spent fuel at nuclear power plants remains in its designated location and is managed and disposed of properly. It is important for the public to recognize that the NRC is working to keep spent nuclear fuel safe and secure.

William N. Outlaw
Director of Communications