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Role of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission in the United States

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is an independent agency of the USA federal government. The mission of the NRC is to protect the public and the environment from the potentially harmful externalities of nuclear power within the United States. More specifically, it aims to deal with the environmental effects of nuclear waste, the impacts of radiation and other byproducts of nuclear energy, and the security threat imposed by fissile material and it’s potential use as a weapon.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission is headed by five directors, who are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. This commission creates all of the policies and regulations that the NRC enforces. The NRC enforces it’s regulations by giving out licenses to groups that wish to deal with nuclear power or nuclear materials. Not having a license to operate is illegal and can result in legal ramifications. The NRC only gives licenses to groups that follow the rules and regulations set out by the NRC.

Because each plant is unique, licenses are approved on a case by case basis, but there exist common regulations that each plant is required to follow. For instance, in light of the recent nuclear disaster in Fukushima security regulations were tightened, including a requirement that new plants be able to withstand an airplane crash. The basics of NRC regulation include requirements that nuclear plants be safe, that radioactive materials leftover from reactors and other applications be safely contained, and that the sale of radioactive materials be regulated, so that no potentially dangerous groups would end up with the means of creating any form of weapon.

Because of the disaster at Fukushima, the NRC is clamping down on nuclear plants. They are creating stricter safety regulations, requiring new inspections, and being harsher on enforcing safety standards. For instance, they are “re-assessing plants' ability to withstand a major earthquake”. The NRC denied Entergy, a power company that owns nuclear plants, a request for less rigorous testing on one of it’s plants (Indian Point unit 3). Entergy argued that the plant was safe due to new equipment and risk evaluations. Nonetheless, the NRC did not change views, saying they “listened to the arguments and … remain convinced at this point that Indian Point warrants the highest level of attention”. The NRC is taking no chances, and is doing everything in it’s power to limit the harmful externalities of nuclear energy.