

# The Nuclear MONITOR

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## GLENN, GAO CHALLENGE RADIATION STANDARDS

Sen. John Glenn and the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) are challenging the disparate radiation protection standards promulgated by various government agencies.

In a ground-breaking report, the GAO said that existing radiation protection standards vary widely from agency to agency and that there seems to be no government consensus on what represents an "acceptable" radiation risk to the public.

The GAO recommended that EPA and NRC get together and determine what represents an "acceptable" radiation risk, and then set joint standards.

For his part, Sen. Glenn (D-Ohio) said he has given NRC, EPA and DOE 90 days to come up with "a comprehensive plan for addressing these inconsistencies" or he will introduce legislation to change the current radiation protection framework.

The GAO noted that standards governing high-level radioactive waste storage, "low-level" radioactive waste storage, operation of nuclear reactors, releases from uranium mill tailings site, and so on, are all contradictory. The NRC's recent ERORR decommissioning standards proposed rulemaking also does not fit in with any existing radiation protection standards.

The GAO cited different

risk calculation strategies and different protective strategies as the reasons behind the vastly different approaches to radiation protection chosen by different agencies.

But perhaps most telling was a chart included in the report, which makes clear that all government-wide-radiation protection standards fall far below similar protective standards for toxics, pesticides, and other hazardous substances.

Protective standards for toxics and pesticides typically fall in the 1 in 10,000 to 1 in 1,000,000 lifetime fatal cancer range.

But "acceptable" routine releases from NRC-licensed facilities are, according to GAO, in the 1-300 lifetime fatal cancer range (actually, according to NRC, about 1 in 286).

For effluents from reactors, the risk is in the 1-6,000 to 1 in 10,000 range.

For "low-level" waste facilities, NIRS standards are 1 in 1,000 lifetime fatal cancer rate, according to GAO.

Protection from radium-226 is as little as 1 in 50, according to existing NRC standards.

NRC occupational standards for nuclear workers are a startling 1 in 8 lifetime fatal cancer rate, according to GAO. The NRC argues that most workers do not receive the maximum allowable dose. Of those that do, however, the odds are clearly not good.

For the proposed high-level waste dump at Yucca Mountain, Nevada, current EPA proposed risks run from 1 in 2,000 to 1 in 36,000.

The GAO compared these risk levels to those espoused by the

Superfund program, which seek a 1 in 15,000 to 1 in 1,500,000 lifetime fatal cancer risk.

In short, risk of fatal cancers from "acceptable" radiation risks far outweigh those of other regulated toxic substances. Indeed, the NRC's own stated "safety goal"

of the risk of an actual nuclear reactor meltdown--which could kill thousands--is about 1 in 100,000, or far less protective than EPA standards for most Superfund cleanups. The GAO, however, did not address this issue.

What this means for nuclear activists is an imperative to explain to elected officials at all levels of government the risks of continued nuclear power generation and of inadequate public protections standards from federal government regulators.

As most activists know, the risks are real. With its well-researched report and handy charts, the GAO has provided a public service. It has clearly and unambiguously acknowledged these risks, and for the first time, has juxtaposed the tremendous and absurd government variations of "acceptable" risk.

As Congress prepares to re-evaluate radioactive waste laws in 1995, it is essential for grassroots activists to ensure that their congressmembers have seen, and have understood, this GAO report.

Other relevant sources are on reserve in the Reading Room. General references include:

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