

United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission
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COMMISSION PUBLISHES PROPOSED RULE FOR UTILITY ROLE
IN INITIAL REACTOR OPERATOR LICENSE EXAMINATIONS

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has proposed an amendment to its regulations requiring that all nuclear power plant licensees prepare, proctor, and grade their initial reactor operator license examinations and prepare their operating tests subject to NRC approval. The Commission is also asking for public comment on the proposed rule.

Until a final rule is adopted, applicants for operator licenses will continue to be examined by using either NRC-prepared tests or those prepared by utilities participating voluntarily in an NRC-supervised pilot program begun in 1995.

Reactor operator applicants seeking a license to manipulate the controls of a nuclear power plant must pass both a comprehensive, multiple-choice written test and a practical, hands-on examination. The generic fundamentals examination, a separate written test that each applicant must pass to be considered for the final license examination, will continue to be written and administered by the NRC.

All examinations drafted by utilities and tailored to their specific plants would be subject to review, modification, and approval by NRC examiners before the tests are given. If the submitted test or examination fails to meet NRC's quality standards, the NRC would have the option of preparing the test or examination in lieu of accepting or modifying one prepared by a utility. The NRC will continue to administer and grade the hands-on portion of the test, including a control room simulator examination and a one-on-one demonstration of specific operating tasks.

In order for the examinations to be approved by the NRC, they must comply with detailed NRC guidance which deals with matters as the appropriate level of knowledge and difficulty, maintenance of examination security, and restrictions on test preparation by those significantly involved in training license applicants. "Operator Licensing Examination Standards for Power

Reactors" (NUREG-1021) has been revised as guidance for implementation of the new process.

After the revised licensing examination process has become fully operational, the NRC staff will prepare at least one examination annually in each of the agency's four regions to ensure that proficiency in examination writing is maintained and to serve as a quality check on the process.

Historically, either NRC staff examiners or NRC contractors have prepared and administered all operator license tests. In April 1995, the Commission approved a staff proposal to begin a pilot program in which nuclear power plant licensees would prepare the tests under NRC oversight. The Commission took this action in recognition of the substantial improvements in industry training programs, to make the operator licensing more efficient, and to realize budgetary savings.

The NRC staff solicited volunteers for a pilot program in August 1995, and launched the program two months later. Between October 1995 and April 1996, the staff reviewed and approved 22 operator licensing examinations prepared by utilities in accordance with published NRC guidance. These examinations were used to test 1146 applicants for reactor operator and senior reactor operator licenses.

NRC has been spending between \$3 million and \$4 million annually on contractor support for the operator licensing program. Licensing of operators for research and test reactors who will continue to be examined by the NRC would be unaffected by this proposed rule. Also unchanged would be the present system whereby utilities prepare and administer requalification examinations to licensed operators as part of an NRC-approved training program.

Full details of the proposed rule will be included in a notice that will be published shortly in the Federal Register. Comments should be submitted no later than 75 days after publication. They may be sent to: Secretary, U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Washington, DC 20555, Attn: Docketing and Service Branch. Comments may be hand-delivered to 11545 Rockville Pike, Rockville, MD, between 7:30 a.m. and 4:15 p.m. on Federal workdays.

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