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We live in a radioactive world -- natural and manmade. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) licenses use of manmade materials to protect food and blood supplies, make roads and buildings safer, find energy, light emergency exits, kill cancers, warn of fires and more. Some materials are very dangerous, and others relatively benign. For high-risk material usable in "dirty bombs," the NRC has had very tight controls for years.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) told the NRC six weeks ago of a licensing weakness for lower risk materials found through a "sting." NRC immediately fixed that. Now new applicants for lower-risk material licenses get either an on-site visit or a face-to-face interview in our offices to prove their bona fides. A visit or interview was previously at the discretion of license examiners.

The GAO thinks site visits are the way to go for materials at the top of the lower-risk range. Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., at a hearing last Thursday, persuaded me that that's the best course. The full commission is considering this change.

Last year, a GAO sting showed the need to be able to quickly check the authenticity of a license if a U.S. border radiation detector alarm sounds. We fixed that rapidly, too.

Some question the pace at which we acted on lower-risk materials. Government resources are finite. After 9/11, we started on the high-risk materials, making licensing and protection of those so tough that, we believe, terrorists will turn elsewhere. Then we moved on to the lower-risk materials involved in GAO's sting, finalizing our licensing strategy last fall. But we had been experimenting with various options since 2003.

Many GAO and congressional suggestions are items the NRC has in the works, such as an electronic system to flag fraudulent licenses. We are seeking ways to block license counterfeiting and alteration. We are reminding vendors of lower-risk materials to watch for suspect activity, such as the GAO's.

Rather than lagging on materials safety and security, NRC is the world's leader. We are not perfect. No human institution is. But we have fixed and will continue to fix any weaknesses. And we will find them ourselves in the future through "red-teaming" our licensing process.

Edward McGaffigan, Jr., Commissioner
Nuclear Regulatory Commission

Ed McGaffigan, a 31-year veteran of public service, has served on the Commission since 1996.