

## BEYOND NUCLEAR PRESS RELEASE

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### **Nuclear Regulatory Commission Ignores its Own Regulations on Radioactive Leaks; Reactors Leaking for Decades Volunteer to Take Years More before Corrective Action**

TAKOMA PARK, MD – A new report released today by Beyond Nuclear – [\*Leak First, Fix Later: Uncontrolled and Unmonitored Releases from Nuclear Power Plants\*](#) – finds that the United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is ignoring its oversight and enforcement responsibilities at the nation’s increasingly leaky, uninspected and unmaintained nuclear power plants. The report shows that despite agency [efforts initiated in 1979](#) to prevent uncontrolled radioactive releases to groundwater, the NRC is capitulating to an industry decision to take almost [three more years](#) before announcing an action plan. One reactor operator has committed to complete proactive corrective actions by the end of 2010 to prevent recurring radioactive leaks, raising concern over why the rest of the industry needs so much more time.

“The NRC has relinquished its oversight of leaking reactors to an industry where profits have been more important than public health,” said report author, Paul Gunter, director of the Reactor Oversight Project for Beyond Nuclear, a national organization based in Takoma Park, Maryland. “Instead of enforcing its regulations to prevent leaks, NRC is entrusting the nuclear industry with ‘voluntarily’ corrective actions that won’t be announced for years to come.”

The report found that tritium, a radioactive form of hydrogen, along with other radioactive isotopes, have been leaking for decades from U.S. reactors without preventive actions taken by industry or enforced by NRC. Tritium leaking from U.S. reactors has entered ground- and surface water threatening drinking water sources. Tritium is a known carcinogen that can also cause genetic damage and birth defects and presents a biological hazard for up to 120 years. The protective standard for tritium in drinking water varies widely from the EPA standard at 20,000 picocuries per liter to the State of California’s more protective goal of 400 picocuries per liter.

“New water is not created, it is recycled,” said Gunter. “Today’s groundwater is tomorrow’s drinking water.”

The report was released one day before an NRC “*workshop on groundwater at nuclear power plants*” scheduled for 10am-4:30pm at NRC headquarters in Rockville, MD and one week before an April 26 National Academy of Sciences public meeting that will provide details on a proposed new NRC-authorized cancer study around U.S. nuclear plants.

There have been 15 radioactive events involving leaks of tritium and other isotopes into groundwater from [13 different reactor sites](#) since March 2009 alone. At least 102 reactor units are now [documented](#) to have leaked radioactivity into ground- and surface water from 1963 through February, 2009 with many reactor sites experiencing numerous and recurring uncontrolled releases.

*“Leak First, Fix Later”* points out that all nuclear power plants are required under NRC licenses to control and monitor the radioactive effluent including tritium that flows through the miles long tangle of buried pipe systems under each reactor site, and in some instances, through easements under public property. These buried pipes are largely inaccessible, uninspectable, deteriorating and increasingly leaking their radioactive contents – sometimes in the millions of gallons of uncontrolled radioactive releases – into ground- and surface water resources. The report highlights a series of several highly publicized radioactive leaks to groundwater in Illinois, New Jersey, Michigan, New York and Vermont.

“The NRC licensing agreements require reactor operators to control and monitor the radioactive water flowing in this spaghetti bowl of pipes buried under every nuclear power plant,” said Gunter. “The problem is that NRC has lost control of its oversight and enforcement just as the industry has lost control of the radioactive leaks springing from miles of aging pipes,” he said. “More disturbing, the agency is extending these reactor licenses by 20 years absent a management plan for this growing epidemic of radioactive leaks,” he said.

Gunter referred to NRC design control requirements outlined in General Design Criteria 60 and 64 of the Code of Federal Regulation, Title 10, Chapter 50, Appendix A which state operators [shall](#) control and monitor the radioactive effluent in reactor systems as a part of their license conditions.

“The industry admits that they are not legally authorized to dump what basically constitutes their radioactive waste into groundwater and eventually people’s backyards and drinking water,” Gunter documents in the report.

Gunter points to the fact that the Chicago-based nuclear giant Exelon Nuclear has been providing bottled drinking water for the past four years to the community of Godley, Illinois, which neighbors the Braidwood nuclear power plant. Exelon took this action as a result of dozens of pipe leaks that spilled more than six million gallons of radioactive water contaminated with tritium that flowed off power plant site and soaked into groundwater along a four and a half-mile long buried pipe line.

“The NRC needs to take back its authority and prioritize the prevention of these radioactive leaks,” said Gunter. “Right now, the NRC has acquiesced to industry’s ‘leak first, fix later’ piecemeal approach that replaces sections of corroded pipe as they leak rather than replacing whole inaccessible systems,” he said.

“The first and most immediate step is that NRC needs to order industry to replace inaccessible buried pipes with corrosion-resistant materials installed in above-grade vaults so that they can be monitored, maintained and contained if a leak should occur,” says Gunter in one of the report’s recommendations. “*Leak First, Fix Later*” further recommends ways to make the issue more publicly transparent and hold the industry more accountable for the protection of groundwater.

Gunter points out in the report that Exelon was caught with leaking buried pipes at its New Jersey Oyster Creek nuclear power plant only days after receiving a 20-year license extension from NRC in April 2009. On October 22, 2009 Exelon volunteered to make just such a commitment and replace all its buried pipes carrying radioactive water by the end of 2010. Advocates from the communities surrounding Oyster Creek are closely watching Exelon to see if it will honor its “voluntary” commitment on time and establish itself as an industry leader.

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[The Report](http://www.beyondnuclear.org/storage/documents/LeakFirst_FixLater_BeyondNuclear_April182010_FINAL.pdf) and [Executive Summary](http://www.beyondnuclear.org/storage/documents/LeakFirst_FixLater_BeyondNuclear_April182010_FINAL.pdf) can be downloaded from the Beyond Nuclear website at [http://www.beyondnuclear.org/storage/documents/LeakFirst\\_FixLater\\_BeyondNuclear\\_April182010\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.beyondnuclear.org/storage/documents/LeakFirst_FixLater_BeyondNuclear_April182010_FINAL.pdf)

and

[http://beyondnuclear.squarespace.com/storage/documents/LeakFirstFixLater\\_ExecutiveSummary\\_April2010.pdf](http://beyondnuclear.squarespace.com/storage/documents/LeakFirstFixLater_ExecutiveSummary_April2010.pdf)

The report provides an extensive list of and links to web-based documents pertaining to tritium and uncontrolled radioactive releases from nuclear power plants in the United States. A Beyond Nuclear fact sheet on tritium can be viewed at:

<http://www.beyondnuclear.org/storage/documents/Tritiumbasicinfofinal.pdf>

Beyond Nuclear aims to educate and activate the public about the connections between nuclear power and nuclear weapons and the need to abandon both to safeguard our future. Beyond Nuclear advocates for an energy future that is sustainable, benign and democratic. The Beyond Nuclear team works with diverse partners and allies to provide the public, government officials, and the media with the critical information necessary to move humanity toward a world beyond nuclear.

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