press release

Union of Concerned Scientists
Citizens and Scientists for Environmental Solutions

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: **Contact:**
Eric Young 202-223-6133
Tuesday, May 18, 2004 Linda Gunter 202-223-6133

Critical Safety Issues Set To Escalate As US Commercial Reactors Extend Their Life Cycles

NRC Must Increase Oversight and Enforcement to Deal with Nuclear Reactor Aging

WASHINGTON, May 18 — The Union of Concerned Scientists today released a report showing that the country's 103 aging commercial nuclear reactors are entering the most dangerous phase of their life cycle. The report, "U.S. Nuclear Plants in the 21st Century: The Risk of a Lifetime," analyzes the unprecedented risks of reactors entering the wear-out phase and demonstrates that the combination of aging reactors and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's (NRC) indifferent approach to safety enforcement will seriously jeopardize public health for years to come.

"U.S. reactors are now entering the phase where safety system failures, unplanned reactor shutdowns, and accidental releases of radioactivity are becoming more likely," said Dave Lochbaum, Nuclear Safety Engineer with the Union of Concerned Scientists. "The NRC must rigorously enforce federal safety regulations to ensure public health and safety as plant owners try to extend the life cycle of our nation's 103 commercial nuclear reactors."

"Risk of a Lifetime" outlines the life cycle for commercial nuclear power plants. In the beginning of their life (Region A), nuclear reactors, like automobiles, experience more breakdowns. As reactors approach the middle of their productive lives, the flat part of the curve, (Region B) accidents occur less frequently. At the end of their lives, the failure rate curves upward (Region C) to mirror that occurring in the beginning of a reactor's life. Every commercial nuclear reactor in the U.S. is moving towards Region C, if it is not there already.

"With Indian Point's aging reactors we are entering a very dangerous time. We will have another accident like Three Mile Island if the NRC doesn't start taking its job seriously," said Kyle Rabin, Senior Policy Analyst with Riverkeeper. "The combination of aging and lax safety enforcement will lead to devastating accidents if our luck runs out."

The Three Mile Island accident happened 25 years ago and the number of events have steadily declined, an expected transition from Region A to Region B of the bathtub curve. In Region C, the chances of accidents will increase again. The report makes ten recommendations for improving nuclear regulation to manage age-related safety risks.

"Humans, like nuclear reactors, tend to require more care and supervision as infants and when they are elderly than when they are in middle age," said Rochelle Becker of Mothers For Peace, "We worry about the increasing number of nuclear reactors getting fewer safety check-ups as they age. We expect the NRC to protect the lives of our children and our grandchildren and not the financial interests of plant owners and the nuclear industry."

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