

Press Release

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RADIATION EXPOSURE LIMITS WEAKENED IN DEPARTING BUSH MOVE Huge Hikes in Allowable Radioactivity in Drinking Water, Air and Soil

Washington, DC — Late last week the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency moved to dramatically relax public protections against radioactive releases, according to the Committee to Bridge the Gap (CBG) and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER). The new standards permit public exposure to radiation levels vastly higher than EPA had previously deemed unacceptably dangerous.

Outgoing Acting EPA Administrator Marcus Peacock signed off on the new Protective Action Guide on Thursday (January 15th) but the late signing prevented the document from being printed in the *Federal Register* before Inauguration Day. CBG and PEER are calling on the incoming Obama administration to withdraw it from the *Federal Register* before it is published within the next few days.

The radiation “PAGs” are supposed to be protocols for protecting the public from radiological incidents ranging from nuclear power-plant accidents to transportation spills to “dirty” bombs to contamination events at metal recycling facilities. In October, the Bush administration shrugged off objections filed by more than 60 public health and environmental groups to the emerging draft rewrite of the 1992 PAGs.

The groups objected to numerous aspects of the plan, such as –

- **Drinking Water.** EPA has radically increased permissible public exposure to radiation in drinking water, including a nearly 1000-fold increase in permissible concentrations of strontium-90, 3000 to 100,000-fold for iodine-131, and a nearly 25,000 increase for nickel-63. In the most extreme case, the new standard would permit radionuclide concentrations seven million times more lax than permitted under the Safe Drinking Water Act;
- **Lax Cleanups.** Rather than specifying long-term cleanup levels that were health protective, officials could instead choose from a range of “benchmarks” including doses so immensely high that the government’s own official risk estimates indicate one in four people exposed would get cancer from the radiation exposure, on top of their normal risk of cancer. The PAGs also permit cleanup public health considerations to be overridden by economic considerations; and
- **Higher Exposures to More Sources.** EPA relaxed exposure limits for all phases of responding to a radioactive release. For example, concentration limits for nearly twice as many radionuclides have their permissible concentrations relaxed as those that are strengthened for the early phase response, and those that are relaxed are on average weakened by more than double the rate of the smaller number that are enhanced. This despite the fact that the National Academy of Sciences’ estimates of cancer risk from radiation have markedly increased since the 1992 PAGs.

“In their last days in office, the departing Bush Administration shovels out the door astronomical increases in permitted public exposures to radioactivity,” said Daniel Hirsch, the Committee to Bridge the Gap President. “Have they no shame?”

In an unusual move, approximately two-thirds of the text of the new standards are not even being published for review and public comment and presumably have already gone into effect. The remaining third would be subject to public comment but may be relied upon in the meantime.

The relaxation of radiation protection being embraced by EPA has been sought by the nuclear industry and its allies in the Department of Energy and Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The genesis of this action arose in Department of Homeland Security “dirty bomb” policies designed to provide broad flexibility in the aftermath of an attack. EPA has now expanded the relaxed dirty bomb standards to include virtually every type of radioactive release.

“This is yet another lovely parting gift from the Bush administration,” stated PEER Executive Director Jeff Ruch. “The Obama administration can pull this back in the next few days before it gets published and we strongly urge them to do so.”

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Read the new pre- publication EPA Protective Action Guide

http://www.peer.org/docs/epa/01_21_09_PAGs_Proposed_Revisions_Document.pdf

View the letter of opposition from 60 public health groups

<http://www.committeetobridgethegap.org/pdf/EPAAdministratorJohnson103008.pdf>

See the Committee to Bridge the Gap study detailing the effects of EPA’s action

<http://www.committeetobridgethegap.org/pdf/PAGreport102208.pdf>

Lean about the EPA Protective Action Guide process

<http://www.epa.gov/radiation/rert/pags.html#publish>