

Hope for nuclear industry?

Boston

THE US Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is expected soon to authorize sweeping regulatory changes that will shorten the licencing procedure for nuclear plants. The new procedure eliminates the requirement for a separate operating licence for newly constructed reactors, thereby limiting the opportunity for public intervention once a plant has been built. The five-member nuclear commission is expected to vote on the licencing overhaul as early as this week, and the measure is said to be almost sure to win approval.

Renewed interest in nuclear power and frustration over the experiences at the Shoreham and Seabrook plants —

INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE

Non-aligned line-up for new technology

New Delhi

A centre for science and technology of non-aligned and other developing countries was formally established in New Delhi last week after 31 countries signed the centre's statute. Joint research programmes and exchange of experts are some of its objectives, but the centre primarily seeks to pool existing scientific resources, technological and consultancy capabilities in member countries for their common benefit. The centre will be financed by contributions from each member country, fixed at \$15,000 per year. The initial 31 countries are from the Indian subcontinent, Africa and Eastern Europe, but China is not a member. As the host, India has offered an extra \$1.1 million for office building, equipment and transportation. The first-year budget of the centre is \$1.6 million. It will have an Indian director but other key posts are to be filled by people from other member countries.

Computer software, biotechnology, renewable sources of energy telecommunications and new materials are among the areas from which about 30 specific collaborative programmes have been identified. Project expenses will be met by participating countries; the centre will play only a catalytic and coordinating role, although there will be money for pilot plants or infrastructure development.

The centre's first task is to prepare a directory of science and technology institutions, and a list of transferable technologies already available in member states. There are proposals for a common gene bank, a shared database on science and technology and a consortium for technology promotion within the non-aligned club.

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both now built but not operating — have propelled consideration of the new rules. Proponents of the changes argue that the current licencing procedures are unnecessarily cumbersome and expensive to follow.

If adopted, supporters say the new rules will shorten the time needed to begin operating a new plant, simplify the site-selection process and bring standardization in reactor design. In addition, advocates believe that the changes would be an important symbolic incentive to the nuclear industry and to poten-

ess. The new rules would not affect any existing plants (licenced or otherwise).

The idea of revising the licencing procedure for nuclear power plants has been considered for several years, but has usually been discussed as a matter to be dealt with by Congress. Although members of the nuclear regulatory commission and the nuclear industry have urged Congressional action to simplify the licencing procedure, Congress has so far failed to take up the matter. According to one inside observer, the commission "finally got fed up with Congress and decided to go out and change the licencing procedure on their own".

But Ken Bossong, director of the Crit-

USCEA

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The way things were: work in progress on the Palo Verde nuclear generating station

tial financial backers of nuclear power.

But critics argue that the proposed changes are illegal and unsound, and that they are a "blatant effort" to limit public involvement in the licencing process. If passed, the rule changes are sure to face a legal challenge. According to several sources, anti-nuclear groups are meeting currently to decide "who will take the lead" in the legal challenge.

Under the proposed licencing process, only one licence will be given by the nuclear regulatory commission at the construction phase of a new nuclear reactor which would be a combined "construction and provisional operation" licence. At some point shortly before construction of a plant was complete, the utility would seek approval to 'implement' its operating licence.

In other changes would allow utilities to obtain "early site permits" up to 20 years before building a plant. Public disputes over the suitability of the location for the reactor would have to be settled at this early stage. The nuclear regulatory commission would also "pre-approve" several standardized nuclear reactor designs. By using one of these designs, utility would be exempt from part of the present public review proc-

ical Mass Energy Project, likens the proposed changes to awarding a university students a degree "based only on their first year of school". He and other critics contend that the proposed changes "decrease if not eliminate" the possibility to consider flaws or fraud in the construction process, or changes in the site situation — such as roadways, population changes, hospitals or schools — that may occur during the 20 year period after the site has been approved.

In addition, Bossong and others say that the new rules preclude evaluating the financial ability of the utility to operate the plant once construction is finished. Despite the controversy already raging around the rule changes, there is little certainty over how they might affect the beleaguered nuclear industry.

Although they ought to make the construction and licencing process simpler and more concise, several observers note that the financial community is greeting the proposed changes warily. As Bossong puts it, "the industry still has to grapple with widespread public opposition to nuclear power, lack of nuclear waste facilities and economics that are not competitive with other sources of energy".

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