

EPA SCRAPS PROPOSED AIRBORNE RADIOACTIVE EMISSIONS REGULATION

In a decision strongly supported by The Society of Nuclear Medicine, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ruled in late October that it would not control airborne radioactive emissions, including those from hospitals and radiopharmaceutical manufacturing plants.

The Society has been strongly opposed to the EPA's proposed rule, which was first published in the February 1983 *Federal Register*, for two reasons—there is no scientific basis for changing current guidelines as they are satisfactory and there is no way to assure compliance. The rule would have restricted "emissions from each site to the amount that would cause an annual dose equivalent to 10 mrem to any organ or any individual. This emission standard will keep the radiation doses relatively low both to nearby individuals and to populations in the vicinity of sites," the proposal stated.

"Relatively trivial"

In announcing the EPA's decision, Joseph A. Cannon, Assistant Administrator for Air and Radiation, said that the risks of cancer and other diseases from exposure to airborne radionuclides are "relatively trivial." Although there is no safe level of exposure to radioactive materials, reducing exposure to zero is "clearly impossible," he added.

The Environmental Defense Fund immediately filed a lawsuit challenging the decision.

"I'm thrilled with the EPA decision," comments the Society's Chairman of the Socio-Economic Affairs Committee, Raymond Marty, MD. "The EPA recognized the issue is a nonproblem. People are always confusing nonmedical industry with nu-

clear medicine. We don't contribute to the problem."

At the present time, nuclear medicine facilities comply with NRC regulations that set permitted concentrations in air and water above natural background (10 CFR 20.016) on a radionuclide-by-radionuclide basis.

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The regulations allow radioactivity in effluents to unrestricted areas to be documented by NRC licensees as concentrations averaged over a 1-year period.

"The EPA's decision, which allows the Society the relief from emission standards that it has sought, is very welcome," says Government Relations Chairman, Capt. William H. Briner. In his SNM role, he has been involved in fighting the proposal from the beginning.

In June 1983, then SNM President Merle K. Loken, MD, PhD, Capt. Briner, and others met with EPA officials, taking issue with the new regulations on a purely scientific basis. They pointed out that the NRC regulations were quite satisfactory and there was no reason for changing them.

In addition, they pointed out that

the proposed rules would result in a compliance problem. Explains Capt. Briner, "On the average, background radiation is 100 mrem, but this figure varies significantly from area to area, sometimes by 50 mrem. Differentiating an emission of 10 mrem from 30 mrem, for example, then becomes impossible. There would be no way of proving or disproving that an emission from a given site would cause an annual dose of 10 mrem to a given person, as proposed."

Meetings with the EPA continued through this summer, further outlining these points, as well as other considerations. Some of the concerns are:

- **Medical Impact:** If medical facilities cannot determine whether or not they are in compliance, health care could be affected.
- **Pharmaceutical Impact:** The radiopharmaceutical industry is relatively small, accounting for only \$300 million per year in gross sales, but is extremely regulated. The cost of computing emissions from the manufacturing facilities and the need to modify the plants themselves would be significant to an industry already in economic straits. The result would be decreased availability of radiopharmaceuticals for nuclear medical procedures.
- **Increased Costs:** "The cost of employing health physicists and providing voluminous documentation and individuals for this task [of providing computations to indicate compliance with the EPA rules], plus eventual review by the NRC, will certainly be an additional burden and expense," stated the Society in a July 1983 letter to the EPA.

For these reasons, and the points already discussed—namely that there is no scientific basis for changing the rules and that the proposed rule did not account adequately for background emission, "it's obvious that the EPA made the right decision," says Capt. Briner. ■