

Federal rules for radioactive waste OK'd

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Nuclear Regulatory Commission on Friday approved the first federal regulations for burying low-level radioactive wastes.

The regulations, adopted after four years of work, require that land disposal facilities be able to contain low radioactive wastes for 500 years.

Basically, the new rules divide low-level wastes into three categories based on the radiation they emit and set up criteria for the disposal of each.

Compared with the more dangerous highly radioactive wastes found in used reactor fuel, low-level wastes pose relatively little risk to the public. They primarily are resins, rags and clothing contaminated in power plants, laboratories, hospitals and other facilities where radiation is used.

The former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works in Lewiston has been used as a radioactive waste repository since the early 1940s. The 191-acre site on Pletcher Road was part of the government's Manhattan Project, which led to the development of the first hydrogen bomb.

It was not known whether the new federal regulations would affect the LOOW site. The government received a May report from Bechtel National Inc. which recommended the site be used as a permanent radioactive waste repository.

Under the new NRC regulations, about 60 percent of the low-level wastes — those which degrade to a safe radiation level within 100 years — would fall into Class A.

Class B includes wastes with a higher radioactivity that does not degrade to safe levels for up to 300 years. Those

wastes would have to be solidified or buried in high-integrity containers.

The Class C wastes — those that don't degrade for up to 500 years — would have to be solidified and also be buried at least 15 meters under ground.

While all three classes of wastes can be buried at the same facility, they must be kept apart under the new regulations. The regulations require the sources of the wastes — labs, hospitals and nuclear plants — to classify the wastes and ship them separately.

The five-member NRC will vote next week on a proposal by Commissioner John F. Ahearne to require approval by the commission itself, rather than just its staff, for licensing each disposal facility.

Commissioner James Asselstine said Friday he would oppose such a procedure.

But Commissioner Thomas M. Roberts and NRC Chairman Nunzio Palladino expressed interest in the idea after Ahearne said it would help governors convince the public that such facilities in their states pose no health or safety threat.

Massachusetts has a referendum on its election ballot Nov. 2 that, if approved, would allow the state's voters to reject any low-level disposal facility there. The state is one of the largest sources of low-level wastes, primarily in nuclear medicine.

States are responsible for low-level radioactive wastes generated within their borders under a congressional act giving the federal government responsibility for disposing of high-level wastes and spent reactor fuel.