

SPECIAL EVALUATION OF THE
STATUS OF NRC'S WEBSITE

OIG/OOE-08April 20, 2000

REPORT SYNOPSIS

On March 7, 2000, the Inspector General (IG) received a letter from several Congressional members asking him to determine the status of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's (NRC) website, in coordination with the agency's Chief Information Officer (CIO) and Chief Financial Officer. Because of the requesters' need for an early response to this inquiry and the collaborative working relationship established with the agency on this body of work, the Office of the Inspector conducted a short-term, limited assessment instead of a full audit review.

The Acting CIO reported that the agency is employing the newest technologies to make its website more available to the public by using online forms, multimedia technology, and threaded newsgroups. The agency also uses its public website to disseminate information in a manner that ensures maximum public access while remaining consistent with the protection of privacy and security. To meet the intent of Section 508 of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, the NRC currently provides all high-level web pages in a textual format and is working on a website redesign effort. In addition, the agency is using its website as a central repository with links to over 20 online comment forms for individual report and programmatic areas. The Acting CIO also believes that NRC's website is relatively easy to search using its site-wide and topical search engine. As a means of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of its business activities, the agency is also aggressively pursuing e-commerce. In our opinion, the responses provided by the agency adequately demonstrate the NRC's focus with regard to its website and the use of e-commerce.

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INTRODUCTION

On March 7, 2000, the Inspector General (IG) received a request from Congressional representatives asking him to determine the status of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's (NRC) website. The Congressional representatives expressed their belief that, in light of increasing e-commerce over the Internet, the Federal Government has the opportunity and responsibility to further the electronic possibilities of Government, including the increased use of e-commerce. E-commerce is the exchange of goods and services, usually for money, using an Internet website. The Congressional request, which listed specific questions about the agency's website, further asked that the IG develop his response in coordination with the NRC's Chief Information Officer (CIO) and Chief Financial Officer.

Our objective for this special evaluation was to provide the requested information to Congress as soon as possible. To accomplish our objective, we informed the NRC's Executive Council (EC)⁽¹⁾ of the Congressional inquiry and requested that the EC members identify staff members to work with OIG on this project. We coordinated the answers to the questions with the agency and are providing the responses in the body of this report. Because the request sought an early response, we conducted a short-term, limited assessment of the agency's website rather than a full audit. Relying on the agency to provide information in response to the questions, we performed limited validation testing on the NRC's information. Our testing included ensuring the accessibility of website addresses, identifying supporting documentation where possible, and interviewing appropriate agency officials. At a later date, we will explore the value of conducting a full audit of the NRC's website.

BACKGROUND

The NRC, established by the U.S. Congress under the Energy Reorganization Act of 1974, is responsible for ensuring that civilian uses of nuclear materials in the United States are carried out with adequate protection of the public health and safety, the environment, and national security. The scope of NRC's responsibility includes regulation of 103 commercial nuclear power reactors; 37 research, test, and training reactors; 8 major fuel fabrication and production facilities; and 2 gaseous diffusion uranium enrichment facilities. Additionally, the NRC issues approximately 21,000 licenses for medical, academic, and industrial uses of nuclear materials. The NRC also has certain regulatory responsibilities for the transportation, storage, and disposal of nuclear materials and wastes.

The NRC is an independent agency headed by a five-member Commission. The

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NRC's Executive Council consists of the Executive Director for Operations, the Chief Information Officer, and the Chief Financial Officer.

agency currently has about 2,800 employees and its headquarters are in Rockville, Maryland, with four regional offices located in Pennsylvania, Georgia, Illinois, and Texas. In addition to its physical locations, the NRC is available to the public through its public website [<http://www.nrc.gov/>]. For example, the site contains information about the agency's mission and organization, links for news and information, planning and financial management, and public participation and school programs.

RESULTS

Upon OIG's request, the agency independently provided information to support responses to the questions in the joint request from the Congressmen (see Appendix I). The NRC also furnished, where appropriate, specific Internet addresses for the sites identified in response to the questions. Following are the questions and responses.

What newest technology are you using to make information on your website more available to the public?

According to the Acting CIO, the following paragraphs highlight examples of how NRC is using the newest technology to make its website more available to the public. Common web programming techniques, such as Java and Javascript, are employed to facilitate use of NRC's website. NRC also utilizes online forms, multimedia technology, and threaded newsgroups to make information available on its website.

The NRC has established a *Public Electronic Reading Room* [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/ADAMS/index.html>] which is a gateway to a large database of agency records at the agency public website. The entry point to this gateway includes a Javascript application to speed access to NRC's database.

Online forms are available to electronically collect public comments on NRC draft technical reports [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/wwwforms.html>]. Another form available to the public allowed participants to register online for the Regulatory Information Conference [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/REACTOR/RIC/2000/index.html>], an annual agency event that is attended by a large number of NRC stakeholders.

The *Students' Corner* [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/STUDENTS/students.html>] is an informative, multimedia area at the NRC website to inform school children about the basic principles of nuclear energy.

The *Nuclear Regulatory Legislation: 105th Congress* [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/NUREGS/SR0980/index.html>] is a Javascript-enabled interactive guide to those public laws that govern NRC's regulatory mission.

The NRC is creating Java applications to enable licensees and other NRC stakeholders to download and dynamically analyze plant data for statistical purposes [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRR/OVERSIGHT/index.html>].

The *Rulemaking Forum* [<http://ruleforum.llnl.gov/>] gives the public the ability to submit comments on current NRC rulemaking initiatives and to view their comments and those of other participants. In addition, the *Technical Conference* site [<http://techconf.llnl.gov/>] enables users to participate in "threaded newsgroups," which are online topical discussions in areas of interest to NRC stakeholders.

These examples demonstrate how the agency is utilizing the newest technology to provide more information to the public on NRC's website.

How are you complying with the Paperwork Reduction Act by using your website?

According to the Acting CIO, the NRC is ensuring the public dissemination of information through its website in a manner that ensures maximum public access consistent with the protection of privacy and security. The site contains a wide variety of mission-related information. For example, linked to the agency's homepage are sites in the reactor, materials, waste, and radiation protection and emergency response arenas. The site also includes an alphabetical index to site contents, a collection of the Commission's activities, public meeting notices, interactive rulemaking information, employment information, and the agency telephone directory.

At the *Public Electronic Reading Room* site [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/ADAMS/index.html>], the NRC provides the public with access to the Agencywide Documents Access and Management System (ADAMS), which provides all publicly available records that originate within or are received by the agency.

To reduce regulatory burden, the agency is conducting a pilot project with three NRC licensees to permit encrypted communications via the web through an *Electronic Information Exchange* gateway [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/EIE/index.html>]. Once fully implemented, the program should reduce the time it takes to collect required information. This technology can also save the regulated community and the agency substantial costs for the reproduction and mailing of voluminous, multi-volume documents.

The agency stated that its website complies with Privacy Act requirements [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/disclaim.html>]. The site also contains a conspicuous Privacy Act statement that informs site visitors that NRC makes no attempt to identify individual users or their usage habits unless they are suspected of attempting to cause damage to the site. These examples clearly indicate NRC's belief that its website is in compliance with the Paperwork Reduction Act.

How are you complying with Section 508 of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998? Is your site accessible to people with disabilities?

NRC provides all high-level web pages (the homepage itself and all web pages directly accessible from the homepage) in a textual format that meets the intent

of Section 508 of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. On other pages, where practical and feasible, NRC makes content available in a textual format (or as a textual alternative to a graphically oriented page). In some cases, however, the agency believes that it is not economically feasible to make the site fully compliant. For example, if original material is of a graphical nature or is available only in paper, it is textually summarized at the website and presented in portable document format (PDF). The resulting PDF file is not compatible with accessibility tools used by the disabled, such as Adobe's Acrobat Access plug-in. Conversely, if the source material is available in electronic format, the resulting PDF files are compatible with such technologies.

The agency records in the *Public Electronic Reading Room* [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/ADAMS/index.html>], a database gateway accessed through the agency public website, are not accessible to people with disabilities. Therefore, guidance is included at the site to direct people with special access needs to telephone and TTY numbers (for the visually impaired) to contact the NRC librarians in the Public Document Room for assistance.

A redesign effort of NRC's website is currently underway to develop a prototype. Should NRC implement the website prototype, it expects it to be fully compliant with the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance (Access) Board's, *Electronic and Information Technology Accessibility Standards*. Currently, the Access Board's proposed standards are posted in the Federal Register for a 60 day public comment period.

Have you begun using or have you been using your website as a central repository for frequently used forms, files, and information?

The NRC homepage [<http://www.nrc.gov>] allows the public to select an index which contains links to numerous NRC forms, files, and information. More specifically, the *Index of Forms for Soliciting Public Comment* [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/wwwforms.html>] has links to over 20 online comment forms for individual reports and programmatic areas. For example, these comment forms allow a user to submit comments or questions dealing with NRC's Allegation Program or NRC's Draft Inspection Manual.

Another, more specific example of access to frequently used forms is for people who are seeking jobs at NRC. They may now download and print employment application forms from the NRC public website [<http://www.nrc.gov/OP/vacancies/interface.htm>].

NRC's website contains many pages and information collections of high interest to NRC stakeholders and the public. For instance, the *Plant Status Reports* give current operating conditions at all U.S. commercial nuclear power plants each morning. The *Revised Reactor Oversight Process* explains the purpose of NRC's revamped reactor oversight process. Additional information including the *NRC Rulemaking Process*, *Public Meeting Notices*, *News Releases*, and *NRC Commission Activities* can be accessed from NRC's website. Also, nuclear

material licensees may access related licensing files and information from the *Reference Library* [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/reference.html>].

Is your website easily searchable? Do you have a search engine on it?

The Acting CIO believes that the NRC's website is relatively easy to search using a site-wide and topical search engine [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/search.htm>] and an alphabetical index to site topical content [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/INDEX/index.html>].

However, the Acting CIO has received reports from users that the current site design and organization of information are not optimal for locating information and that they have difficulty navigating the site. As a result, the agency has embarked on a redesign effort of its public website. Recognizing the need to continuously improve the site, NRC is holding meetings with its internal stakeholders to solicit their views on how to improve access to its information. The agency also plans to meet with its external stakeholders to solicit their views. In addition, NRC is in the process of issuing a redesign contract to bring in expert talent in usability testing and site analysis to create a prototype website. This prototype will focus on improving public access to information in a manner consistent with the agency's strategic plan and legislation requiring the electronic dissemination of agency information to the public. As part of this initiative, the agency has posted a *Website Redesign Participation Form* [<http://www.nrc.gov/NRC/redesign.html>] to seek volunteers to participate in the redesign effort. The NRC plans to complete the website prototype and implementation by the end of this fiscal year.

What success do you feel your agency has made in terms of expanding and opening up your website to public use?

The Acting CIO reported that NRC's public website is rich in the content areas routinely sought by agency stakeholders and others from throughout the world as evidenced by the approximately 190,000 user sessions each month. To further ensure that the site is as well known as possible, the agency lists its web address in a wide variety of agency publications, such as the *Citizen's Guide to NRC Information*, *The Information Digest*, *The Annual Report*, the latest agency recruitment brochure, solicitations in the *Commerce Business Daily*, notices in the *Federal Register*, and a variety of other publications. The agency has provided its web address to a group of libraries throughout the country that have agreed to host the NRC's historical collection of documents on microfiche. These libraries are generally located near nuclear power reactor and fuel fabrication facilities.

Additionally, NRC staff routinely provide specific site addresses in public meetings. The NRC's website was also the subject of a formal presentation at this year's Regulatory Information Conference. These examples are indicative of NRC's expansion and openness of its website to public use.

Are you using e-commerce when it is most efficient and practical?

The NRC's Division of Contracts and Property Management, Office of Administration, reports that the agency has aggressively pursued e-commerce as a means of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of its business activities. For example, in order to simplify the purchasing and payment process, virtually all agency purchases of \$2,500 or less are made using a Government credit card under NRC's BankCard program. Also, NRC made 98 percent of its payments to contractors electronically through Electronic Funds Transfer in FY 1999. The NRC also posts all agency business opportunities and solicitations on its website (<http://www.nrc.gov/ADM/CONTRACT/contract.html>).

In December 1999, NRC began testing its latest procurement innovation, *Focused Source Selection* (<http://www.nrc.gov/ADM/CONTRACT/Page1.html>), which makes use of the Internet to provide a more streamlined, interactive, and focused approach to the acquisition of management and support services and products. In more detail, *Focused Source Selection* features

- immediate access by all businesses to draft statements of work on NRC's Internet homepage;
- opportunity for all businesses to compete through submittal of non-priced capability statement information which demonstrates satisfactory past performance of, and experience with, similar work;
- selection of three top-ranked businesses to submit cost and technical proposals; and
- negotiations focused on the top-ranked proposal which offers the best integrated technical/cost value to the agency.

Through the use of this procurement innovation and other e-commerce opportunities, the NRC hopes to achieve greater time savings, cost savings, and customer satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

We believe that these responses adequately demonstrate the NRC's focus with regards to its website and the use of e-commerce. However, the agency, along with all Federal agencies, needs to remain aware and stay attuned with developments of Section 508 of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. Most notably, the agency will need to ensure that information technology procurements made on or after August 7, 2000, are in compliance with the Access Board's standards for Section 508.

CONGRESSIONAL INQUIRY

PETE SESSIONS
5TH DISTRICT, TEXAS

COMMITTEE ON RULES


COMMITTEE ON BANKING
(ON LEAVE)

RESULTS CAUCUS
CHAIRMAN



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

February 28, 2000

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Dear Mr. Bell:

We write to request your assistance in joining with your CIO/CFO to determine the status of your agency's website. In light of the increasing e-commerce over the Internet, we believe the Federal Government has the opportunity, and responsibility to further the "e" possibilities of government.

Specifically, we are interested in your responding to the following items:

- What newest technology are you using to make information on your website more available to the public?
- How are you complying with the Paperwork Reduction Act by using your website?
- How are you complying with section 508 of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998?
- Is your website accessible to those with disabilities?
- Have you begun using or have you been using your website as a central repository for frequently used forms, files and information?
- Is your website easily searchable? Do you have a search engine on it?
- What success do you feel your agency has made in terms of expanding and opening up your website to public use?
- Are you using e-commerce when it is most efficient and practical?

COMM-1 VH 8:21

N2 MBO

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Thank for your consideration of this correspondence. We appreciate your quick response to our requests and look forward to working with you in this eGov initiative. Please provide us with any further information you believe will aid us in this effort. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact Jackie Moran at 202.226.8422.

Sincerely,



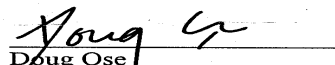
Pete Sessions, Chairman
Results Caucus



Tom Davis, Chairman
Subcommittee on D.C.



David Dreier, Chairman
Committee on Rules

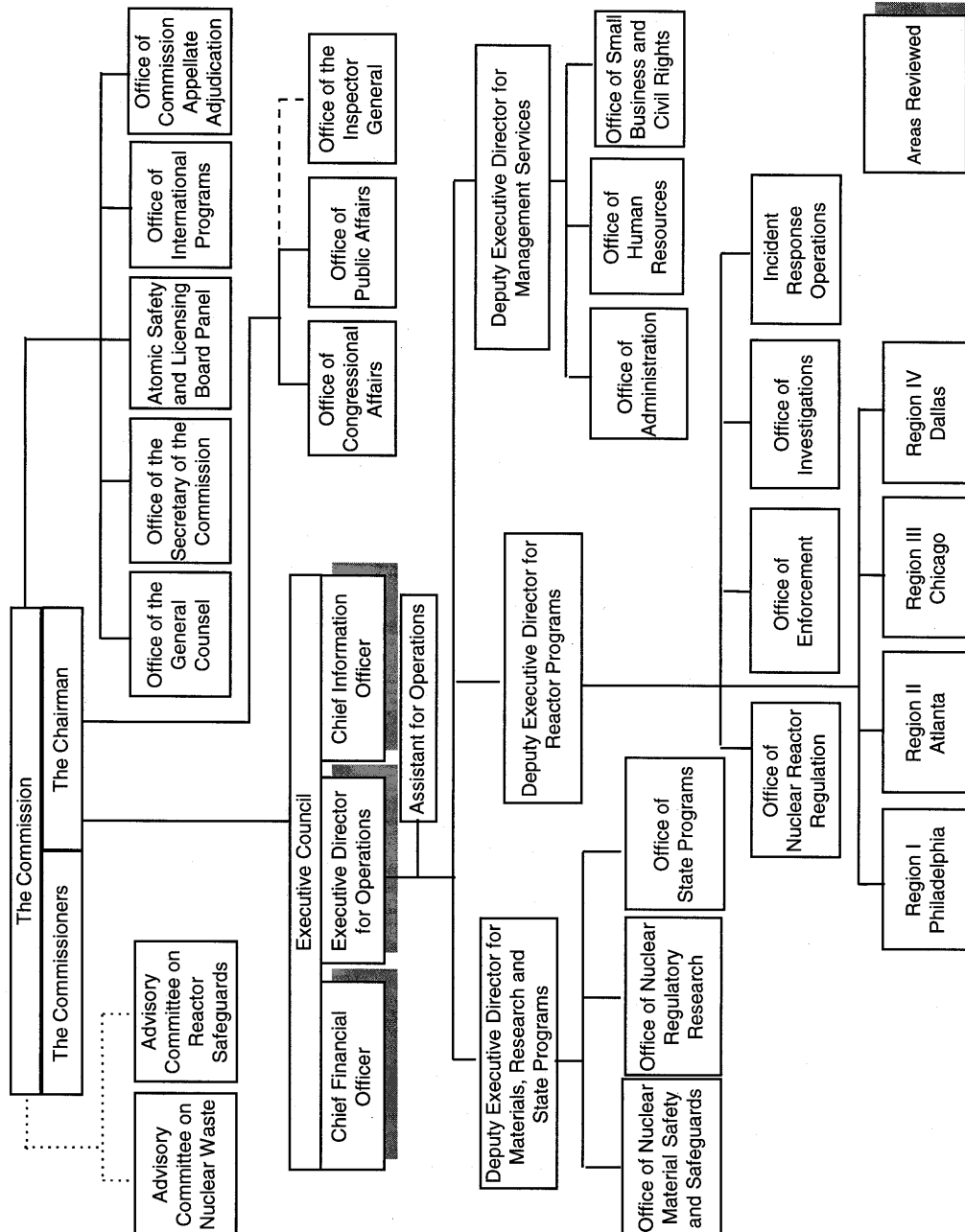


Doug Ose
Member of Congress

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

| | |
|--|---|
| Agencywide Documents Access and Management System (ADAMS) | the policies, processes, and software tools to manage unclassified, official program and administrative records of lasting business value to the NRC in an electronic rather than paperbased environment. |
| e-commerce | the exchange of goods and services, usually for money, using an Internet website. |
| gateway | a combination of hardware and software that links systems. |
| Java | a programming language (that is embedded into HTML documents) that can be used to create animations and interactive features on Internet sites. |
| Javascript | a scripting language (that can interact with HTML) to enable authors to design interactive Internet sites. |
| portable document format (PDF) | the capturing of formatting information from a variety of applications that makes it possible to distribute a document with its original appearance preserved for viewing and printing on any system. |

NRC ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



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