

NRC abandons prior estimate on reactor lifespans

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By Jeff Donn ROCKVILLE, Maryland (AP) — When commercial nuclear power was getting its start in the 1960s and 1970s, industry and regulators stated unequivocally that reactors were designed only to operate for 40 years. Now they tell another story — insisting that the units were built with no inherent life span, and can run for up to a century, an Associated Press investigation shows.

By rewriting history, plant owners are making it easier to extend the lives of dozens of reactors in a relicensing process that resembles nothing more than an elaborate rubber stamp.

As part of a yearlong investigation of aging issues at the nation's nuclear power plants, the AP found that the relicensing process often lacks fully independent safety reviews. Records show that paperwork of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission sometimes matches word-for-word the language used in a plant operator's application.

Also, the relicensing process relies heavily on such paperwork, with very little onsite inspection and verification. And under relicensing rules, tighter standards are not required to compensate for decades of wear and tear.

So far, 66 of 104 reactors have been granted license renewals. Most of the 20-year extensions have been granted with scant public attention. And the NRC has yet to reject a single application to extend an original license. The process has been so routine that many in the industry are already planning for additional license extensions, which could push the plants to operate for 80 years, and then 100.

Regulators and industry now contend that the 40-year limit was chosen for economic reasons and to satisfy antitrust concerns, not for safety issues. They contend that a nuclear plant has no technical limit on its life.

But an AP review of historical records, along with interviews with engineers who helped develop nuclear power, shows just the

opposite: Reactors were made to last only 40 years. Period.

The record also shows that a design limitation on operating life was an accepted truism.