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Concerned Citizens Challenge Nuclear Irradiator at Honolulu Airport

Threats from tsunamis, hurricanes, terrorism not evaluated

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Honolulu, HI-- Yesterday, Earthjustice, on behalf of community group Concerned Citizens of Honolulu, petitioned the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to hold a hearing on a nuclear irradiator proposed for Honolulu International Airport. The petition claims there are inadequate measures to prevent mechanical failures, power outages, airplane accidents, acts of sabotage or terrorism, hurricanes, or tsunamis from causing significant releases of radioactive material from the irradiator, threatening public health and safety and the environment.

Concerned Citizens' petition responds to an application by Pa'ina Hawaii, LLC to build and operate a Cobalt-60 irradiator to treat fruit and vegetables for fruit flies. The petition seeks a comprehensive environmental review of the proposal under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), including consideration of alternate locations and technologies that could kill fruit flies without the threat of nuclear catastrophe. To date, the NRC has refused the community's requests to conduct an environmental review.

"Putting a facility packed with radioactive material at Hawai'i's main airport, in the middle of urban Honolulu, and in a tsunami evacuation zone is almost asking for a natural disaster, air crash or terrorist attack," said David Paulson, a member of Concerned Citizens. "It is outrageous that the NRC has refused to conduct any analysis of the threats to the safety and health of me and my community that Pa'ina Hawaii's irradiator would pose."

The proposed site for the irradiator, which is less than 8 feet above sea level, would be at risk from damage associated with wave run-up similar to that experienced in the devastating tsunami in southeast Asia in December 2004. The irradiator would also be vulnerable to wave run-up and high winds associated with a major tropical storm or hurricane, as illustrated by the catastrophic losses suffered along the Gulf Coast in September 2005 from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and on Kaua'i from Hurricanes 'Iwa (1982) and 'Iniki (1992). In addition, placing up to a million curies of Co-60 – which can be used to make dirty bombs – at Honolulu International Airport and adjacent to Hickam Air Force Base and Pearl Harbor would present a tempting target for terrorists intent on disrupting one of the major transportation hubs in the Pacific and on striking near major military

installations. Aviation accidents – which, on average happen more than twice a year at Honolulu’s airport – pose yet another threat to Pa‘ina Hawaii’s proposed irradiator, which would be located immediately adjacent to numerous runways.

“I thought putting hazardous waste next to the ocean was a thing of the past,” said Darryn Ng, a member of Concerned Citizens. “I live near the airport and fish out of the small boat harbor at Ke‘ehi Lagoon, just across from where Pa‘ina Hawaii wants to put its nuclear irradiator. My family goes down to the lagoon to watch the canoe races. How would a nuclear accident at the irradiator harm me or my family? How would it affect the ocean? We deserve answers to those questions.”

NEPA requires each federal agency, including the NRC, that is considering approval of a project that might have a significant impact on the human environment to prepare either an environmental assessment or a more comprehensive environmental impact statement. The purpose of this review is to put on the table, for the deciding agency’s and the public’s view, a sufficiently detailed statement of environmental impacts and alternatives so as to permit informed decision-making. NEPA provides opportunities for the public to participate in the review process, to ensure the NRC does not overlook issues of concern to the community.

“NEPA requires the NRC to ‘look before it leaps,’ analyzing threats to public safety and the environment posed by Pa‘ina Hawaii’s irradiator, as well as alternatives that could achieve the project’s goals with less harm, before making any decision on the proposal,” explained David Henkin, a lawyer from Earthjustice representing Concerned Citizens. “It is not only legally required, but simple common sense, to wait until you’ve looked at the potentially catastrophic impacts from an accident or act of sabotage before giving Pa‘ina Hawaii’s irradiator the green light.”