

08-3903-ag
New York v. Nuclear Regulatory Commission

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS

FOR THE SECOND CIRCUIT

August Term, 2009

(Argued: October 23, 2009 Decided: December 21, 2009)

Docket Nos. 08-3903-ag(L), 08-4833-ag(con), 08-5571-ag(con)

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THE STATE OF NEW YORK; RICHARD BLUMENTHAL,
Attorney General of Connecticut; and the
COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS,

Petitioners,

- v. -

UNITED STATES NUCLEAR REGULATORY
COMMISSION; and the UNITED STATES OF
AMERICA,

Respondents,

and

ENTERGY NUCLEAR OPERATIONS INC., et al.,

Intervenor-Respondents.

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Before: JACOBS, Chief Judge, KEARSE, Circuit
 Judge, and GARDEPHE, * District Judge.

* Paul G. Gardephe, of the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, sitting by designation.

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2 Petition for review of a decision of the Nuclear
3 Regulatory Commission denying rulemaking petitions filed by
4 Massachusetts and California. As the Nuclear Regulatory
5 Commission has given due consideration to the relevant
6 studies concerning the rulemaking petitions, we must defer
7 to its expertise in determining the proper risk level
8 associated with the storage of nuclear material in spent
9 fuel pools, and therefore deny the petition to review the
10 Nuclear Regulatory Commission's decision.

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22
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3
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9 Institute, Inc. in support of
10 Federal Respondents, Intervenor-
11 Respondents, and Affirmance.

12
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20 Petitioners.

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24 PER CURIAM:

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26 The States of New York and Connecticut and the
27 Commonwealth of Massachusetts (collectively the "States")
28 petition for review of a decision of the Nuclear Regulatory
29 Commission ("NRC") denying rulemaking petitions filed by
30 Massachusetts and California. As the NRC has given due
31 consideration to the relevant studies, we must defer to
32 their expertise in determining the proper risk level
33 associated with the storage of nuclear material in spent
34 fuel pools, and therefore deny the petition for review.

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I

Two States filed rulemaking petitions (Massachusetts in 2006, and California in 2007) asking the NRC to reverse its 1996 Generic Environmental Impact Statement, which found (among other things) that spent fuel pools at nuclear power plants do not create a significant environmental impact within the meaning of the National Environmental Policy Act, 42 U.S.C. § 4321 et seq. The NRC consolidated and denied the rulemaking petitions in a 2008 decision. See 42 U.S.C. § 2239(a)(1)(A). United States Courts of Appeal have jurisdiction to review such final orders of the NRC. 28 U.S.C. § 2342(4). The States petitioning for review here (New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts) claim standing on the ground that nuclear power plants are within or near their borders and that an accident at one of these plants could harm their citizens.

Under the National Environmental Policy Act ("NEPA"), each federal agency must prepare an Environmental Impact Statement ("EIS") before taking a major action that significantly affects the quality of the "human environment." 42 U.S.C. § 4332(2)(C). The renewal of a license for a nuclear power plant is a major action

1 requiring an EIS under NRC regulations. See 10 C.F.R. §
2 51.20.

3 The EIS required for license issuance and renewal at
4 nuclear power plants covers both generic and plant-specific
5 environmental impacts. The NRC has decided that these two
6 kinds of impacts are to be treated separately. Category I
7 impacts are those that: 1) are common to all nuclear power
8 plants; 2) can be assigned a uniform significance level of
9 small, moderate, or large (even if the impact is not
10 precisely the same at each plant); and 3) do not require
11 plant-specific kinds of mitigation. Category II impacts
12 require site-by-site evaluation. Since Category I impacts
13 are common to each license renewal, the NRC has produced a
14 Generic Environmental Impact Statement ("GEIS") that applies
15 to these common issues. Massachusetts v. United States, 522
16 F.3d 115, 120 (1st Cir. 2008). The GEIS, combined with a
17 site-specific EIS, constitutes the complete EIS required by
18 NEPA for the major federal action of a plant's license
19 renewal. Id. (noting also that the GEIS was codified as a
20 final rule in Environmental Review for Renewal of Nuclear
21 Power Plant Operating Licenses, 61 Fed. Reg. 28,467 (June 5,
22 1996)).

1 The NRC classifies on-site storage of spent fuel in
2 pools as a Category I issue that causes a small
3 environmental impact. Massachusetts and California
4 contended that the information in their rulemaking petitions
5 showed a greater risk of fire from this source than
6 previously appreciated, and that therefore the environmental
7 impact should no longer be discounted as small; they further
8 contended that the risk should be evaluated plant-by-plant
9 (rather than be considered within Category I). New York and
10 Connecticut supported these original petitions. The NRC
11 considered both petitions together, and concluded that its
12 initial determination was correct. After these petitions
13 were denied in August 2008, this petition for review
14 followed.

15
16 **II**

17 An agency decision to deny a rulemaking petition is
18 subject to judicial review; but that review is "extremely
19 limited and highly deferential." Massachusetts v. EPA, 549
20 U.S. 497, 527-28 (2007) (internal quotation marks omitted).
21 It "is to be overturned if it is arbitrary, capricious, an
22 abuse of discretion, or otherwise not in accordance with

1 law"; but this standard is applied "at the high end of the
2 range of deference and an agency refusal is overturned only
3 in the rarest and most compelling of circumstances." EMR
4 Network v. FCC, 391 F.3d 269, 272-273 (D.C. Cir. 2004)
5 (internal quotation marks and citation omitted). Such
6 compelling circumstances would typically involve "plain
7 errors of law" relating to the agency's delegated authority.
8 Am. Horse Prot. Ass'n v. Lyng, 812 F.2d 1, 5 (D.C. Cir.
9 1987).

10 This standard has been said to be so high as to be
11 "akin to non-reviewability." Cellnet Comm'n, Inc. v. FCC,
12 965 F.2d 1106, 1111 (D.C. Cir. 1992). To deny review of a
13 rulemaking petition, a court typically need do no more than
14 assure itself that an agency's decision was "reasoned,"
15 meaning that it considered the relevant factors. Lyng, 812
16 F.2d at 5 (internal quotation marks omitted).

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18 **III**

19 The States' primary arguments on appeal are that: 1)
20 new information submitted by Massachusetts and California in
21 their petitions (and New York in support of those petitions)
22 show that the risk of a spent fuel pool fire is not so

1 remote that, when considered in light of the potentially
2 devastating effects, on-site storage in pools has a low
3 environmental impact; and 2) the NRC's decision to deny the
4 rulemaking petitions was arbitrary and capricious because it
5 relied on plant-specific mitigation and security to support
6 a finding that spent fuel pools generically have low
7 environmental impacts.

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A

10 The risks posed by keeping nuclear fuel on site in
11 spent fuel pools--including the risk of fire--have been
12 considered in studies prepared over the past four decades.
13 The studies relied on by the NRC all found that the risk of
14 a fire was low. These studies (including those conducted
15 since September 2001) consider the risk of fire precipitated
16 by a terrorist attack, and classify that risk as low.¹

¹ This opinion need not and does not reach the circuit split as to whether the NRC must take into account acts of terrorism when drafting an EIS about license renewal. Compare N.J. Dep't of Env'tl. Prot. v. U.S. NRC, 561 F.3d 132, 139-40 (3d Cir. 2009) (holding that the NRC does not need to consider the risk of terrorism when preparing an EIS), with San Luis Obispo Mothers for Peace v. NRC, 449 F.3d 1016, 1031 (9th Cir. 2006) (holding that the NRC does need to consider the risk of terrorism when preparing an EIS). We conclude that the NRC did sufficiently take into account acts of terrorism when deciding that the risk of

1 The NRC had already analyzed most of the studies
2 submitted in connection with Massachusetts and California's
3 petitions; the petitioners simply disagree with the NRC's
4 interpretation of those studies. Massachusetts and
5 California did submit one study that the NRC had not
6 previously considered; but the NRC--having examined this
7 study in considering whether to grant the petitions--
8 concluded that it was not as accurate as the studies on
9 which the NRC had previously relied.

10 These are technical and scientific studies. "Courts
11 should be particularly reluctant to second-guess agency
12 choices involving scientific disputes that are in the
13 agency's province of expertise. Deference is desirable."
14 Browning-Ferris Indus. of South Jersey, Inc. v. Muszynski,
15 899 F.2d 151, 160 (2d Cir. 1990), limited on other grounds
16 by Steel Co. v. Citizens for a Better Env't, 523 U.S. 83, 93
17 (1998). "Particularly when we consider a purely factual
18 question within the area of competence of an administrative
19 agency created by Congress, and when resolution of that
20 question depends on 'engineering and scientific'

fire at a spent fuel pool was uniformly low, and therefore we need not decide whether the NRC could have avoided considering this issue.

1 considerations, we recognize the relevant agency's technical
2 expertise and experience, and defer to its analysis unless
3 it is without substantial basis in fact." Fed. Power Comm'n
4 v. Fla. Power & Light Co., 404 U.S. 453, 463 (1972). The
5 relevant studies cited by the NRC in this case constitute a
6 sufficient "substantial basis in fact" for its conclusion
7 that the overall risk is low. See Id. We therefore
8 conclude the NRC's decision was not an abuse of its
9 discretion.

10
11 **B**

12 The States on appeal contend that the risk of a spent
13 fuel pool fire must be a Category II rather than a Category
14 I risk, because the risk is affected by mitigation that
15 varies from plant to plant. It is true that the NRC relies
16 in part upon mitigation at nuclear power plants--including
17 various coolant sprays and makeup water systems in case of
18 pool drainage--to conclude that the risk of an accidental or
19 terrorist-caused fire in the pools is uniformly low.
20 However, the NRC has mandated that these mitigation tactics
21 be implemented at *all* nuclear power plants. The NRC
22 decision states that the agency has "approved license

1 amendments and issued safety evaluations to incorporate
2 these [mitigation] strategies into the plant licensing bases
3 of all operating nuclear power plants in the United States.”
4 The NRC also requires heightened security at all plants as
5 part of its licensing process in the wake of the September
6 11, 2001 attacks. See 10 C.F.R. § 50.54(hh); Power Reactor
7 Security Requirements, 74 Fed. Reg. 13,975 (Mar. 27, 2009).
8 An agency may take into account attempts to mitigate an
9 environmental impact when determining that an environmental
10 impact is small enough to not require an EIS, so long as the
11 effectiveness of the mitigation is demonstrated by
12 substantial evidence. Nat’l Audubon Soc’y v. Hoffman, 132
13 F.3d 7, 17 (2d Cir. 1997). The NRC relies on numerous
14 studies detailing the effectiveness of its required
15 mitigation measures; these studies constitute substantial
16 evidence.

18 CONCLUSION

19 We conclude that the NRC’s decision denying the
20 rulemaking petitions was reasoned; it considered the
21 relevant studies, and it took account of the relevant
22 factors. We therefore must conclude that the agency acted

1 within its broad discretion. We find the States' other
2 arguments to be without merit. The States' petition to
3 review the NRC's denial of the rulemaking petitions is
4 denied.